

Stranger Things 2: The Continuing Story of Mike and Eleven by TheJiffyLube6

Category: Stranger Things, 2016

Genre: Romance, Sci-Fi

Language: English

Characters: Eleven/Jane H., Mike W.

Pairings: Mike W./Eleven/Jane H.

Status: Completed

Published: 2018-01-19 21:34:25

Updated: 2018-02-21 23:04:30

Packaged: 2019-12-17 00:45:40

Rating: T

Chapters: 10

Words: 77,833

Publisher: www.fanfiction.net

Summary: Sequel to Stranger Things: The Story of Mike and Eleven. A novelization of the Season 2 of Stranger Things with the sole focus on Mike and Eleven.

1. Chapter 1: MADMAX

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CHAPTER 1: MADMAX

Day 351.

He could hear it in Dustin's voice; he didn't want to be the one to call him. But then again, Mike wasn't really interested in talking to him either.

"Mike, do you copy? Mike, you copy?" Dustin's voice droned flatly through the receiver.

Mike debated with himself for a second, deciding whether he was actually going to respond. Sitting here in the *her* fort Mike always got lost in memories of her.

It had been almost a year now, 351 days to be exact, and he had been hyper-aware of every minute of it. That's because every second of every minute of every hour of every day had been excruciating without her. He had spent one perfect week with her before she disappeared, and that week is what kept him going. He would do anything to get her back, anything.

The first few months Mike took every chance he could to look for her, the school, town, the quarry, Mirkwood. Regularly, he would cut class and just wander aimlessly through the halls of Hawkins Middle, hoping for a glimpse of her short brown hair around every corner. When he wasn't at school, Mike was canvassing Mirkwood, the place he had first laid eyes on her, cold and shivering in the rain in nothing but a ratty hospital gown, but she wasn't there. He searched every where but there was never any sign of her or the Upside Down for that matter.

Currently, Mike was in the same position he had been at this time of night for the last 351 days, sitting cross-legged in *her* fort. It was hard

to even think her name despite the fact that it had almost been a year since she'd been gone. All of the books and movies had got it wrong... time doesn't heal all wounds. Day 351 hurt just as bad as Day 1, maybe worse, because with each passing day he felt further and further away from her.

Mike just couldn't accept that she was gone. His mind had convinced himself that there was no possible way she was dead. If she had died, wouldn't there have been a body? Even if there had been a body, that didn't mean she was dead either, take for example Will's situation last year. Thinking of Will made Mike think that maybe, just maybe she was stuck in the Upside Down. His mind had gone over this more than a thousand times; it would explain why there was no body, it would explain why she couldn't get back to him.

Then there were the feelings he would get sometimes when he sat alone in her fort. It was as though she was in the room with him, but he couldn't see her. It was driving him crazy, but he couldn't shake the feeling that she was around. So, he spent the majority of his time down here, hoping that if she came back, this would be the first place she'd come to, and he'd be here waiting for her.

From Day 1, Mike had called her every night on the Supercomm. He knew it was stupid, but he couldn't bring himself to stop. He just got the sense that she could hear him somehow. He couldn't explain it, but it was cathartic to tell her about his day even if she couldn't hear him.

It was always pretty much the same, Mike would report the date, ask her if she could hear him, silence would ring back at him, his hopes crushed, he would talk about his day, and then just sit there in utter misery until he was almost too tired to haul himself to bed. On more than one occasion he had fallen asleep in her fort, his face mottled with dried tears.

His friends had given up hope of finding her a long time ago. Sure, they missed her, but they had accepted that she was never coming back, something Mike was unwilling and incapable of doing. They just didn't get it. As a result, their friendship had been strained the past year because Mike just felt like none of them understood. Will was able to empathize somewhat, but Mike knew he was dealing with

his own issues. Mike tried to be there for him, but it was hard when getting Will back had meant losing El, the only girl he had ever really liked. Maybe even loved.

Familiar pain shot through Mike's chest as the memories flooded his mind, but he refused to drown in them. He had just finished day 351's call to her when Dustin had called, so, he decided it was better to respond, maybe his friend could distract him from thinking about her for just a little while.

"Yeah, yeah, I copy," he replied, unable to conceal the slight annoyance.

"What the hell are you doing on this channel?" Dustin asked in an accusatory tone.

"Nothing," Mike shot back a little too quickly to not be suspicious, but thankfully Dustin let it drop.

It was silly, he knew it, but he liked to talk to her on channel eleven. He thought maybe it'd be the first channel she would try, but really it was just another one of those things that brought even the smallest bit of comfort and made him feel closer to her somehow.

"Well, Lucas and I have six bucks total, what's your haul?"

He had completely forgotten. They were all supposed to go to the arcade tonight.

"Shit, shit! I don't know yet," Mike swore, trying to think quickly.

"What do you mean you don't know yet?" Dustin's voice rose in frustration, but Mike already had an idea about how he was going to get some quarters.

Ending the conversation with Dustin, Mike shoved the antenna back into the Supercomm and ran to Nancy's room. He looked all over, he knew she had a piggy bank in here somewhere. Searching her drawers wasn't really his favorite idea in the world, but he was desperate.

As he was shaking change out of it and onto her bed, Nancy burst

into the room.

"I'll pay you back!" he yelled at her, scooping up as much of the change as he dared and got out of there. He could feel Nancy chasing after him, even as he ran his bike halfway down the street before throwing his leg over it and pedaling away. The last thing he heard was her shouting after him,

"Asshole!"

The arcade had only been a distraction. That's how Mike lived his life now. It hurt too much when he was alone with his thoughts, so being in the loud crowds of the arcade always helped him forget even if for only a little while.

His mind began to wander though as Dustin began yelling at Keith, mad he wouldn't reveal who Madmax was who had beaten all their high scores, but Mike could really care less. It wasn't really worth fighting with him over it and it certainly wasn't worth prostituting his sister, even if she was being a major jerk these days.

These games weren't really his thing, anyway. He preferred Dungeons & Dragons, but even that brought him little joy anymore; all it did was remind him of her every time they played and eventually the guys stopped asking to play because Mike's campaigns sucked now. He'd had to buy a new set after the bad men from the lab had raided his house last year, but it just wasn't the same. The memory of El flipping over the D&D board to show them that Will was hiding in the Upside Down floated to the surface of his mind. He still couldn't believe he hadn't gotten it when she couldn't have made it any more obvious. It would have saved them so much pain and heartache, but none of that mattered now. All of that seemed so trivial now that she was gone.

He was so lost in his thoughts that he almost didn't realize that Will was no longer with them.

His eyes swept around the arcade, searching for the smallest member of their party. After everything that had happened to Will last year, Mike felt responsible for making sure his friend was okay. He didn't

want El's sacrifice to find Will and save them to be in vain. Lucas and Dustin cared about Will, but they just hadn't been affected by the events of last year the way he and Will had.

Not seeing the tell-tale bowl-cut hair in the arcade, Mike stepped outside, and his eyes fell on Will, staring off into the night sky blankly. Mike followed his line of sight and saw nothing, but this was how Will had been since he had gotten back, mentally somewhere else.

"Will, are you okay?" Mike asked him, concerned. Will turned to him slowly, the all too familiar haunted look still reflected in his eyes.

"Yeah, I just... I just needed some air," he said in daze. Mike felt bad for him, he really did. Whatever he had experienced in the Upside Down may never truly leave him, and Mike got it. After all, he'd never be the same without El either.

"Come on, you're up on Dig Dug," Mike opted for his usual attempts at cheering his friend up, encouraging, "Let's take that top score back, huh?"

He threw a friendly arm around Will's shoulder and led him back into the arcade.

Day 352.

Mike had Mr. Clarke for science first period with all of the guys. Mr. Clarke was easily one of Mike's favorite teachers and science was easily his favorite subject, so his attention was on Mr. Clarke's lecture. It was actually really interesting, and Mike was able to get lost in Mr. Clarke's excitement over the human brain.

Almost every day, Mike sat in this room and had to pretend like his life hadn't ended in this school 352 days ago. So, while Mr. Clarke's lessons were always fascinating, how was he was supposed to ever completely focus on anything that he was saying?

He thought back to that lab table she had laid on, the last time he held her hands. His heart squeezed painfully in his chest, but Mike

had learned how to hide it. At least it hadn't happened in this room. Otherwise, Mike didn't think he'd be able to handle that.

The door opening distracted him for a moment.

There was a new girl. Maxine. Max. Madmax?

Who cares? Mike thought to himself as he watched her take her seat. Well, Dustin and Lucas cared apparently.

"There's no way that's Madmax," Mike insisted as they all watched the new red-headed girl skateboard in between classes.

Truthfully, Mike was annoyed with Lucas and Dustin's newfound obsession. It felt weird standing out here and watching her all because those two thought she had beaten them at some dumb arcade games.

"Yeah, girls don't play video games," Will reasoned, but Mike internally disagreed. If El was still here then he would have loved to take her to the arcade and show her all the games. She would have loved it. She *will* love it, when she gets back.

Mike had to push these thoughts from his mind. Instead, he argued,

"And even if they did, you can't get 750,000 points on Dig Dug. I mean, that's impossible."

"But her name is Max," Lucas countered back, his eyes focused with rapt attention on this new girl.

"So, what?" Mike huffed, not seeing Lucas' point, or caring to really.

"So, how many Max's do you know?" Lucas asked, it wasn't harsh but Mike could feel himself getting defensive,

"I don't know."

"Zero. That's how many," Lucas felt like he had won the debate, Mike could hear it in his voice.

"Yeah, and she shows up at school the day after someone with the same name breaks our top score. I mean, you kidding me?" Dustin rationalized.

"Exactly. So, she's gotta be Madmax. She's gotta be," Lucas agreed.

"And plus, she skateboards, so she's gotta be pretty awesome," Dustin said with a smile on his face as he watched her. For some reason, this really pissed off Mike.

When they had found El in the woods, a girl who actually needed their help and had obviously been treated like shit her whole life Lucas had been adamant that she was "crazy" and a "weirdo" and made fun of Mike for actually treating her like a human being. Lucas had only said she was awesome when she had flipped that van with her powers and saved all of their lives. Now, some random girl shows up, skates around, and maybe plays arcade games, and all of sudden and she is awesome?

Anger burned in Mike's chest at their hypocrisy and he couldn't help his harsh reaction,

"Awesome? You haven't even spoken a word to her!"

"I don't have to. I mean, look at her," Dustin seemed unaware of Mike's ire. "Shit, I've lost the target."

"There," Will turned and they all followed his line of sight.

They watched as Max picked up her skateboard, headed up the steps to the door of the school, and dropped a piece of paper into the trashcan below. As soon as she was out of sight, Dustin, Lucas, and Will ran towards the trashcan. Mike followed behind, not as enthused.

When they reached the trashcan, Dustin dug around in there to find the piece of paper Max had thrown away. A group of girls past them and Mike felt the need to wave awkwardly at them, so they would look a little less suspicious. It didn't work.

Dustin found the paper and unrolled it, and they all looked over his shoulder to read aloud,

'Stop spying on me, CREEPS.'

"Well, shit," Dustin said and Mike felt the smile curl his lips. They kind of deserved that for being stalkers.

They were all caught off guard when the principal showed up behind them, his voice formal,

"William Byers, you're mother's here."

Mike watched Will walk away with the principal, his whole demeanor changed, any trace of a smile gone from their friend's face.

He, Dustin, and Lucas approached the chain link fence to watch their get in his mom's car.

"You guys think he's okay?" Dustin's voice had lowered slightly, partly to be discreet and partly because of his concern for Will.

"He's always weird when he has to go in," Lucas said, not meanly, but just as though he were stating a fact. Lucas did have a habit of intellectualizing everything. Facts were easier than feelings.

"I don't know...He's quiet today," Mike was worried about Will. He hadn't been the same since he had gotten back from the Upside Down, which was completely understandable. But all these visits to the lab were getting more frequent and seemed to have more of an affect on him. Mike couldn't help but think Will was going through something alone... something inside that he didn't feel like he could share with them yet. And as curious as Mike was he wasn't going to pry.

He just hoped his friend would realize he could talk to him soon. Will was the only member of the party that Mike felt comfortable talking to about El. Maybe it was because he had never met her or maybe it was because Will had always been a little more sensitive than the others, but Mike felt like Will was the only one that got it and listened.

Mike had simply stopped bringing up her name to Dustin and Lucas. They just told him to accept she was gone or didn't seem to realize that talking about her was still painful. Their lack of empathy

extended to Will too as highlighted by Lucas' response to Mike's concern for Will,

"He's always quiet."

Mike was done stalking this girl. He didn't give a shit if she was Madmax or not. So, instead of hanging out with the guys after school when they suggested it, he opted to go home.

This had become his norm. He would come home after school and go straight to his room where he would do whatever homework he felt like doing. If it was a bad day that usually meant just Mr. Clarke's assignments and nothing else. Then his mom would call him down for dinner and he'd grit his teeth and bare it until he could go down to the basement.

Today was a bad day. There was more of those than good days since she had gone. So, he just laid on his bed, over the covers, staring at the ceiling. He was lost in thoughts of El when his mom called him down for dinner. He forced himself to close those thoughts off while he was around his parents, so dinner was usually pretty quiet except for his mom trying to make conversation.

"After dinner I want you to pick out your toys for the yard sale."

Mike didn't even raise his head to look at his mom. He really just didn't care about the stupid yard sale. It wasn't worth the fight, so he replied shortly,

"Fine."

"Two boxes worth," his mom stipulated and that got Mike's attention.

"Two boxes?!" Mike repeated incredulously. That was basically all of his toys. Nancy didn't have to get rid of that much stuff.

"You heard me," his mom asserted, giving him a withering look, one he completely ignored.

This was bullshit. He needed those toys, some of them were the only tangible reminders of El he had left. How could they expect him to

get rid of them? It would be like getting rid of El and Mike wouldn't do that.

"I'm fine with giving away a couple but the other ones just have way too much emotional value," Mike reasoned, his tone argumentative. He couldn't exactly tell them why the toys had sentimental meaning but for once he just wished they would just trust him or even make an effort to understand.

"Emotional value?" his mom scoffed, clearly not believing him. This only fueled his anger at the injustice of it all.

The truth was, Mike didn't really give two shits about most of his toys but there were those that he had showed to El almost a year ago and they kept the memory of her alive. Having them around reminded him that she had been real and not just some figment of his imagination.

"They're hunks of plastic, Michael," this was his dad's contribution. All his dad ever succeeded in doing was minimizing his feelings, trying to make Mike feel like he was being ridiculous.

"You already took away my Atari!" Mike roared.

He had tried to be honest with them, talk about his feelings, this is what he always got: two parents that were too busy being miserable to listen when he was trying to open up to them. His mom was always notorious for telling him and Nancy that they would talk to her, but it was bullshit.

Looking nonplussed, his mother paused, lowering her fork and calmly reasoning, "If you didn't want to lose more toys, you shouldn't have stolen from Nancy."

"I didn't steal, I borrowed!" Mike argued defensively.

"And you didn't curse out Mr. Kowalski last week either, right? Or plagiarize that essay? Or graffiti the bathroom stall?" his mom listed his offenses in rapid succession as if they were all related or something.

So, what? He had cursed out Mr. Kowalski because he was being a

jackass. They had been in third period social studies and that tool had been trying to tell them about the history of Hawkins lab, spouting off some bullshit about being a government facility making state of the art technology. Mike remembered how a fire had blazed in his chest, thinking to himself, *'Yeah, a state of the art government facility where they abuse children and make them into weapons for their own sadistic use.'*

What Mike had actually said was, "You're so fucking full of shit."

Needless to say, Mr. Kowalski had thrown him out the classroom, but Mike didn't give a shit. Those government pricks didn't deserve to be taught about like heroes in a middle school social studies class.

The second incident his mother had been referring to was last school year when he had stayed up all night talking to El on the Supercomm. He hadn't had time to write that essay, so he managed to find an old one of Nancy's and copied it. Still, not a big deal.

Mike remembered the graffiti too. It was on another one of his bad days. He was just so tired of trying to pretend like everything was fine and normal, but it wasn't and it was crushing him slowly. So, he needed to get away from everyone even his friends. In between classes he stayed in the bathroom and wrote the number eleven on the metal door. His mom had thought maybe it was some weird gang thing at first since she said he'd been acting weird since last November, but a quick check with his friends' moms told her that wasn't it.

Of course, Mike was acting weird. He had lost a part of himself he hadn't even realized he needed. El had come into his life and shattered everything he thought he knew about himself and now he was supposed to go on like normal, like she had never existed. Well, it wasn't possible.

"Everyone graffiti's the bathroom stall," Mike challenged. It was true after all and it diverted from the main point.

"So, if your friend jumps off a cliff, you're gonna jump too?" his dad asked rhetorically in between bites of food.

His dad would never get it. He didn't even know how wrong he was and he didn't even care to get to know his son. All Mike could think was the time he had jumped off the cliff at the quarry in order to save Dustin from getting knifed by Troy. But she had saved him, just like she always did. He could use saving right about now.

"Look, we know you've had a hard year, Michael, but we've been patient. This isn't strike one, this isn't even strike three," Mike could tell his mom was trying to sound sympathetic, but she had no idea what she was talking about. Hard year? That didn't even begin to encompass the feeling of waking up every morning knowing that a piece of his soul was missing.

His dad picked up where she left off,

"It's strike twenty. You're on the bench, son. And if it had been my coach, you'd be lucky to still be on the team."

Mike gave his dad a disgusted look at his stupid metaphor. What the hell was that supposed to mean? This wasn't a stupid sports game. Was his dad trying to say Mike should be kicked out of the family or something? As if Mike wanted to sit here every night with these people who had no idea what he was going through or cared.

"Two boxes. Two," his mom said with finality, going back to her dinner. Mike's anger continued to quietly simmer, so he took it out on his dinner, stabbing a carrot so hard into his plate that he thought he might break it.

Mike angrily threw toy after toy into the yard sale box. Eventually, his eyes fell on Rory the Dinosaur and he picked him up. The familiar wave of memories flooded him as he thought back to how he had shown El the speaker in his mouth, even if she had been more interested in his science fair stuff at the time.

He decided to keep that one.

Then he looked down and saw his Millennium Falcon. He could almost see the image of Dustin holding the toy in front of El's face and dropping it. At the time, it had pissed Mike off because El wasn't

some kind of performing monkey, just there to entertain them.

That sharp pain in his chest had returned whenever he thought about her. But it was about that time too.

Setting down the toy, Mike made his way over to the fort, sitting down cross-legged inside, and picking up the Supercomm as was his usual ritual. After all this time, he had become a little particular about his routine.

"Hello, are you there? El?" he paused, releasing the talk button to listen for a response, before continuing breathlessly, "It me, it's Mike. It's day 352. 7:40pm. I'm-I'm still here."

He released the button again. This is how it went every single night since she had gone. Mike would wait with bated breath, straining his ears for anything in the white noise. But she was never there.

"If you're out there, say something, or-or give me a sign. I won't even say anything just, I want to know if you're okay," Mike knew he sounded desperate, but he was. He would give anything to hear her soft voice on the other end of the radio..

"So stupid," he muttered to himself irritably. Why did he keep getting his hopes up like that every single night for almost the past year? Because he was a complete idiot, that's why. Mike stood and made to walk out of the basement, uninterested in finishing filling those stupid yard sale boxes. His mom would be pissed but Mike could care less at the moment.

"Mike," a muffled voice came through the Supercomm, stopping him in his tracks. Was that...?

"Mike." The second time the voice spoke, Mike was already back down in the fort, gasping, his heart racing.

"Hello! Is that you?!" he practically shouted in his excitement.

"Yeah, it's me, *Dustin*," the voice continued, now sounding more like his friend, and disappointment felt like it was crushing him. Mike couldn't even speak because it felt as though his throat was closing.

"*What're you doing on this channel again? I've been trying to reach you all day. We were right! Max is Madmax,*" Dustin reported to him excitedly, but Mike couldn't care less about the stupid girl they were stalking.

"Yeah, I'm busy," Mike said curtly, shoving the antenna back into the radio roughly. Mike stood up and stomped away from the fort, angry with himself again for getting his hopes up again.

Even though she was back in her room, Eleven could still hear the distinctive pattern of knocks on the front door of the cabin. For a moment she considered not unlocking the door, but she did anyway, mostly because she was hungry for dinner.

"Hey, what'd we talk about?" she heard Hopper call from the kitchen. He must have discovered her half-eaten plate of Eggo's but it was his fault. She had been so hungry and they were supposed to eat together, but he was late.

"No signal," she called back in frustration.

"What?"

"No signal. It's 8-1-5. You're late," she elaborated, still annoyed with him for being mad at *her* for eating dessert when she should be the one mad at *him* for being late.

"Yeah, I lost track of time, I'll signal next time, all right and it's 8:15, not 8-1-5," Hopper apologized half-heartedly and she was still mad at him, especially because he corrected her. But she was hungry and she was done waiting to eat.

"8:15," she repeated, unimpressed with his apology. He was always late and he always said he would signal her, but he never did. She was getting tired of it.

"Now, what did we talk about? Dinner first then dessert. Always. That's a rule, yeah?" again he was reprimanding her when he was the reason she had to eat dessert first.

"Yes." She agreed, just wanting to placate him so she could finally eat.

She didn't tell him, but she had seen Mike again. Hopper wouldn't understand her need to see Mike, so she stopped telling him.

It had taken her a while to realize she could use the TV to find him and even longer to find out that he was talking to her on the Supercomm every night at pretty much the same time. She had figured it out on Day 21, and she had visited him every night since.

Eleven loved hearing his voice. It was the only thing she had to hold on to here. Eleven felt good knowing he was okay and he was still waiting for her, but she wanted to see him in person. She had watched him get taller and listened as his voice got deeper. But she noticed other things... Mike seemed sadder than the whole-hearted boy she had met almost a year ago.

Eleven's heart constricted painfully every time she watched he hopeful expression on Mike's face fall into despair. Every day, he seemed to retreat further and further into himself and each day she felt closer and closer to letting him know she was listening, alive and missing him just as much as he missed her. But for now, she ate her dinner in silence, watching Hopper resentfully across the table.

A/N: I'm baaaack! So, I already knew this story was going to be about 75% Mike and Eleven's individual introspection but hey, I like feelings, what can I say? I hope you do too!

2. Chapter 2: Trick or Treat, Freak

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CHAPTER 2: TRICK OR TREAT, FREAK

"Goodbye, Mike,"

Eleven's own words echoed around in her head. Images of her ripping the monster apart with her powers flashing in her brain, making her nauseous. She was going to throw up. Wait, how was she nauseous? Shouldn't she be dead? She was really going to be sick.

Her eyes shot open and her body convulsed as she heaved semi-clear goopy stuff from her throat. Gasping for air, Eleven tried to fill her strained lungs with much needed oxygen, but even the air itself felt toxic. That thought gave her pause as she glanced around her, her eyes taking in her surroundings for the first time.

Dark, cold, dead everywhere.

The Upside Down.

Exhaustion was gripping her again, threatening to pull her back into unconsciousness, but she fought it. Pushing herself up, Eleven stood and began walking out of the classroom and into the hall she had just been in... it couldn't have been that long ago.

There was only one person she needed to find. One person who could make everything okay.

"Mike," she called weakly, looking down the hall as she leant against the cold wall for support.

Panic was beginning to set in as she stood there cold and alone, realizing she didn't know how to get out of this place, or if Mike was even okay. She had surely killed the Demogorgon, so he had to be safe, right? But what about the bad men...?

She needed to find him.

"Mike!" she called louder, her heart beat beginning to pick up speed. She glanced all around her, breathing in the poisonous air, burning her lungs, or was that the tears building behind her eyelids?

"MIKE! MIKE! MIKE!" Eleven screamed over and over again, frantically searching the halls, desperate to find the dark-haired boy, the only person she could trust. She knew he would look for her, but what if he couldn't hear her? What if she was trapped in this place like Will had been?

As she stumbled down the hallways, she turned a corner and took a moment to catch her breath when something caught her eye. A large red... thing was the only word she could think of to describe it, was in the middle of the wall. She was drawn to it, hearing voices emanating from it as well.

When she was close enough to it, she realized that the men on the other side were pointing flashlights at it and for a second her heart stopped, she thought she had been seen. She spun away and flattened herself to the wall, listening as their voices began to fade away to nothing.

Determining they were gone, Eleven reached her hand through the slimy stuff and somehow just knew this was a portal back to the Right-side Up. So, she removed her hand, looking at the goo with disgust, and stepped back.

She was absolutely exhausted, but she had to get out of here and find Mike. So, she raised her hand and tucked her chin, glaring at the portal and focusing her mind on the task at hand. Slowly, the walls began to give way, brick by brick, and she was able to push her body through. It was gross but she had made it out.

For a moment, Eleven just stayed on the floor on her hands and knees, gathering her energy and allowing herself time to catch her breath. Then, she stood and began walking out of the school, knowing where she had to go. Maybe it was her powers, maybe it was just a feeling but she knew Mike wasn't at the school anymore.

She remembered the way to Mike's house, having come from there to the school to use the radio to hear Will in the Upside Down, but Eleven was

mostly just following her instinct where she felt Mike's presence. When she got close, she followed the powerlines to his house, but somehow she ended up near the front of his house instead of the back, it must have been different powerlines.

But as she came to the top of the hill, bright, blue flashing lights stopped her in her tracks.

The bad men...

Her heart had stopped beating and Eleven was having more trouble breathing now than when she had been in the Upside Down. All she could think was that the bad men had gotten Mike. She had tried so hard to protect him and she had failed. And yet... she could still sense him here. She knew he was alive which was some relief.

Concerned only for Mike's safety and forgetting her own, Eleven approached the house, walking right up to the front window where she could feel Mike was closest to.

And there he was. His dark hair falling onto his forehead, his pretty eyes, darker than usual with anger. She couldn't hear what the bad people were saying to him, but she could tell it was upsetting him.

She wanted so badly to call out to him, let him know she was there.

As if he could sense her there too, Mike's face had slowly turned to her and she could've sworn that he saw her. She couldn't look away though. His brown eyes were narrowed as they strained to look out into the dark and her pulse raced to see them again.

But Eleven could tell that the bad men had noticed Mike's distraction, they would turn to look at her any second.

Eleven had done a lot of difficult things in her life, she'd hurt people, even killed people, she'd runaway from the only home she ever knew and left her Papa, and she had strained her power to her limits to save her friends. but turning away from Mike was easily the hardest thing she had ever done.

And yet, somehow she did it. Eleven tore her eyes away from the only person who have ever made her feel safe, the only person she ever truly

cared for, and walked away. In a daze she stumbled away from Mike's house, tears already obscuring her vision, but she managed to not be seen, or at least that's what she hoped.

That night she hid in the woods near Mike's house under a giant fallen tree. Silent sobs wracked her body, already shivering from the cold and from fear. But all of that was inconsequential because Eleven had come to the soul-shattering realization that as long as she was around, Mike would always be in danger. So, she would stay away to protect him, even if it destroyed her.

They had been grilling him for over an hour and Mike's patience was wearing thin. After visiting Will at the hospital, his parents had driven him home, only to see flashing blue lights in the driveway. Mike wasn't stupid, he knew these were just more of the bad men, trying to find El, they must think she's still alive too.

It had been one hell of a night. El had only been gone mere hours and while Mike's gut told him she was still alive, it still hurt worse than any pain he'd ever experienced to see her disappear with the Demogorgon. And now these bastards were in his house trying to get him to give her up to them? No way.

"Let's go back to the beginning-," the woman's voice was calm, but Mike could sense their annoyance at his refusal to give in to their manipulative tactics. She kneeled next to him like he was some kind of small child.

"I've told you everything," he insisted. Sure, he had told them what they already knew, that El had lived in his basement for a week, one life-changing week, and now she was gone. There wasn't anything else to tell.

"I understand this is difficult, Michael," the tall man standing next to him said with all the empathy of a robot.

"I don't know where she is and even if I did I'd never tell you," Mike growled, looking up at him fiercely as he repeated, "I would never tell you."

"I know it's difficult to accept, but the stories she told you were not true. She's a very dangerous individual," the woman kept speaking as if Mike

hadn't said anything.

Mike laughed on the inside. Yes, El had lied about things and yes, she was a 'dangerous individual,' but not to him. She was a danger to anyone who tried to hurt her... or him, so Mike wasn't buying into their bullshit.

"If she contacts you, you must tell us," the man insisted, but Mike had stopped listening.

"Otherwise, you're putting yourself and your family at risk. Do you understand, Michael? Do you understand?"

They both continued to talk but Mike had felt something. He couldn't explain it but almost of their own accord his eyes were drawn forward to look out the window. There was a very narrow gap in the curtains and it was pitch black outside, but Mike's heart stopped at what he saw: he swore he could just make out half of the outline of a girl with a shaved head, one piercing brown eye staring back at him.

"Michael? Michael?"

"Michael? Michael? It's time to get up!"

Mike was jolted awake at the sound of his mom's voice calling through his bedroom door.

Growling to himself, Mike pulled the blankets over his face. He didn't care if it was Halloween, he'd rather stay in bed than face another day without El.

Eleven woke up a little earlier than usual, excitement making it difficult to sleep. Last night, when she had visited Mike in her mind, he had told her about Halloween and that it would be today. She had been watching a lot of TV and had some idea of what Halloween was at this point, but she loved hearing Mike talk about it, or really anything for that matter.

'Oh, and tomorrow's Halloween- it's this holiday where all of the kids dress up in costumes, like ghosts and zombies and stuff, and they go trick or treating- trick or treating, is like when you go to each house and knock on the door and shout 'Trick or treat!' and people give you candy. Me and

the guys are dressing up as the Ghostbuster's- that's a movie. I'll show it to you when you get back. Anyway, Halloween is my favorite holiday. I wish you were here so we could go trick or treating together....'

His voice had started off so excited and then by the end of his call had returned to the sorrowful tone she had become so used to, but every single time she heard it, it felt as though her heart was breaking.

Then she thought, well if everyone would be in costumes, why *couldn't* she go with him? It would be the best surprise ever! She could dress up as a ghost so she could be part of their group- Eleven hadn't see the Ghostbuster movie because Hopper's TV didn't get many channels, but she had seen commercials for it and she knew the word ghost so maybe she would fit in with their group with no one knowing it was her.

As soon as the idea had popped into her head, Eleven ran with it, her heart swelling with excitement at the idea of getting to see Mike in real life. He would be so happy, she just knew it, and seeing his happy would make her so very happy too.

So, she found some extra sheets that had been covering the furniture when Hopper had first brought her here and cut out holes for eyes, just as she had seen a kid do on the TV. She threw the sheet over her, lining up the holes with her eyes. Hearing Hopper, making breakfast, Eleven decided to make her move.

Approaching him slowly Eleven stopped a few feet behind him. He didn't notice her at first but when he looked over his shoulder she saw him jump a little in surprise as he exclaimed,

"Oh! Jesus."

He recovered quickly and went back to the pan on the stove, it looked like he had made French toast, as he called it.

"Ghost," Eleven said simply, hoping she wouldn't have to say too much to get him to understand her request.

"Yeah, I see that," he said flatly, removing the pan from the stove and

not looking over at her again.

"Halloween," she added, trying to get him to hear what she was trying to say. Mike would have understood right away.

"Sure is, but right now it's breakfast, okay? Come on, let's eat," Hopper continued, more focused on putting the French toast on plates for them than what she was trying to say to him.

Frustrated by his lack of understanding, Eleven concluded she would have to use full sentences, something she was still not completely comfortable with her limited vocabulary. She formed what she wanted to say in her head first before she spoke aloud, insisting,

"They wouldn't see me."

That got Hopper's attention, but only briefly. He quickly looked away from her again, picked up their plates, and walked around her, asking nonchalantly,

"Who wouldn't see you?"

"The bad men," she clarified, knowing he already knew and was just playing dumb.

"What're you talking about?" he asked, still not meeting her gaze, as he set the plates down on the little table.

"Trick or treat," her tone flat, doing her best to keep any emotions out of her tone, lest he pick up on the excitement or frustration or annoyance she was feeling.

"You want to go trick or treating?" he asked in disbelief, as if she were out of her mind.

In response, she simply nodded, holding her breath in anticipation of his response, even though she already knew how he would react.

Hopper stood up, looking away from her, reminding her unnecessarily,

"You know the rules."

"Yes, but-," she tried but he cut her off quickly.

"Then you know the answer."

"No- but they wouldn't see me-," she got a little further into her explanation even as he took her by the arms and began guiding her backwards to her seat at the table, talking over her.

"I don't care. I don't care, all right? You go out there, ghost or not, it's a risk. We don't take risks, all right? They're stupid and..." now he was bending down slightly to look her directly in the eyes, his tone harsh before waiting for her to finish his sentence.

"We're not stupid," she growled back at him, her hopes dashed once again, replaced only with cold anger.

"Exactly," he seemed a little taken off guard by her fierce reply, but he remained stern. "Now, you take that off, sit down, and eat. Your food's getting cold."

For a moment Eleven just stood there fuming, staring straight into the space he had just vacated, willing herself not to use her powers on him to do something she would regret. He hadn't hurt her, so it was wrong to hurt him.

Gathering herself enough to move, Eleven ripped the sheet from over her head and plopped down onto her chair, arms crossed in defiance. Hopper seemed to ignore her reaction and poured syrup over her French toast.

They had done this so many times, she didn't know why she expected this to go any differently. But again, she had allowed herself to get her hopes up over a stupid plan to see Mike in real life and again Hopper had crushed them without batting an eyelash. So, she should be used this feeling of utter disappointment, and yet it felt as though her heart was being stomped on every single time.

Hopper must have finally sensed her darkened mood because he spoke in a much softer voice, "All right, look. How about I get off early tonight and I can buy us a bunch of candy and we can sit around and get fat and watch a scary movie together."

While he spoke her eyes lifted to him. She could tell he was trying but it wasn't what she wanted. His plan was better than a normal day, but paled in comparison with the idea of seeing Mike and going trick or treating.

"How's that for compromise?" he asked her, but she didn't understand.

"C-compromise?"

"C-O-M, promise? Compromise," he tried again, and Eleven could feel her annoyance rise again. She hated the way he tried to explain things to her. He said it as though she didn't understand anything, like she was a baby. Mike did a much better job. For one, Mike always seemed to immediately realize when he said something she might not know about having been raised in the lab. And two, Mike could explain things in a way that didn't make her feel small. He would tell her about it with such excitement, as if nothing brought him more joy than showing her his world.

Thinking of Mike only made her heart hurt, especially with the fresh wound Hopper had just inflicted of not being able to go trick or treating with him and their friends.

"How about that's your word for the day? Yeah? It's something that's like in between. It's like halfway happy," he continued to explain, still in that tone, but she tried to ignore it and instead focused on his suggestion of coming home early.

"By 5-1-5?" she asked, looking at him doubtfully. He never came back early.

"5:15, yeah, sure," he confirmed, his eyes softer than they had been before.

"Promise?" she asked.

"Yes. I promise," he looked at her seriously, but he had promised before.

"Halfway happy," she replied with a shrug, grabbing her fork and preparing to eat. But this seemed to make him halfway happy too

because he smiled and ruffled her hair. She liked when he was silly, so she smiled back in response, but she already knew he wouldn't keep his promise. He never did.

"All right, that's the last one," Mike insisted with exasperation. He was still mad at his mom for making him get rid of his toys last night, so he wasn't really in the mood for this photo session.

"No, just one more! C'mon, please?" she whined, already putting the camera back up to her face.

"Can I go to school?" he asked, ready to get as far away from this embarrassing situation as possible, but his mom just wouldn't stop.

"Wait, wait, wait. Say, 'who you gonna call?'"

"No!"

Mike finally just walked out of the house, mounting his bike and pedaling off. Halfway down the road, Lucas joined him and then Dustin.

They all rode up to the school and parked their bikes on the rack, singing the theme song to Ghostbusters. Mike's spirits were uplifted somewhat because it was Halloween. He could be someone different and not just the miserable person he had become without El.

"Who you gonna call?" they all sung, and Will came up behind them shouting in response,

"Ghostbusters!"

As they turned around to greet Will and Lucas gave him a friendly hug, Mike swore he heard Will greet Lucas as Venkman...

"Whoa, whoa," Mike began, finally noticing Lucas' name patch for the first time.

"What?" Lucas seemed taken aback by his reaction.

"Why are you Venkman?" Mike asked, feeling his disbelief turning

into anger.

"Because I'm Venkman," Lucas said as if it were obvious. Well, it wasn't.

"No, I'm Venkman," Mike insisted.

"Why can't there just be two Venkmans?" Will tried to intervene between, sensing a fight brewing, but Mike wouldn't have it.

"Because there's only one Venkman in real life. We planned this months ago. I'm Venkman, Dustin's Stantz, you're Egon, and you're Winston," Mike argued heatedly, gesturing to each of them in turn.

Mike knew he was getting fired up by something that probably seemed so trivial to the other guys, but it wasn't trivial to him. Anyone who had seen Ghostbusters would know that Venkman was the leader, he was the guy that got the girl. Winston was barely part of the team.

"I specifically didn't agree to Winston," Lucas reminded him, but Mike didn't remember it that way.

"Yes, you did," Mike shot back.

"I don't think he did," Will was always trying to be diplomatic but Mike ignored him.

"No one wants to be Winston, man," Lucas reasoned..

"What's wrong with Winston?" he asked defensively, even though he knew the answer. He was just trying to get Lucas to want to be Winston.

"What's wrong with Winston?" Lucas asked in disbelief. "He joined the team super late, he's not funny, and he's not even a scientist."

"Yeah, but he's still cool," Mike tried to say convincingly but he knew his defense of Winston fell flat. He wasn't fooling anybody.

"If he's cool, then you be Winston," Lucas challenged.

"I can't," Mike's voice wavered a little. He really didn't want to have this conversation right here, in the front of the school, with all of their classmates out here. How was he supposed to explain that he just identified with the character because of El? It was silly, and he knew it, but every little thing reminded him of her and he just needed this one thing.

"Why?"

"B-because...", Mike stuttered, he really couldn't explain how he weirdly identified with a fictional sci-fi character, especially because Lucas already didn't take him seriously about his feelings for El.

"B-b-because you're not black?" Lucas mocked him.

Mike was hurt that he would even suggest that. That had nothing to do with it! So, he defended himself lamely, unable to say what the real reason was and thus sounded even less believable, "I didn't say that!"

"You thought it," Lucas kept pushing and Mike just really wanted this whole interaction to be over. Couldn't Lucas see how much this stupid little thing meant to him and just be Winston? Then Mike got his wish for an out.

"Guys! Guys! Guys!" Dustin called out to them until he got their attention, all turning to look at what he was staring at. "Why is no one else wearing costumes?"

After the roller coaster of emotions that was her morning, Eleven did her normal routine for the day, did some reading to expand her vocabulary, and then curled up on the couch, wrapped in a warm blanket, and watched TV. This is what Eleven did all day every day. Nothing ever changed. Nothing ever happened.

The TV had certainly taught her a lot about the world this past year. Hopper was supposed to be teaching her, but he was never home until it was dark and time for bed. All he did was give her a word for the day, sometimes, and then tell her to read. She felt like she was learning more quickly from the TV than the books.

Each channel was as interesting as the last until she landed on a familiar show, something Hopper called nonsense, but Eleven was always captivated by it.

She sat up a little straighter watching the story with rapt attention. Repeating the lines, not understanding most of what they were saying but getting the basic idea. The man wanted to marry the woman, Hopper had explained marriage to her when she had heard it on the TV on Day 167. Every day since then, she learned everything she could about it. She knew it was only for adults, but she couldn't help but wonder if maybe one day Mike would get down on his knee like men on TV and ask her to marry him. She would, of course, say yes.

Then there was the sound of scampering outside the window. Glancing over her shoulder, Eleven pushed the thoughts of Mike as far back into her mind as she could and got up from the couch, making her way over to see a squirrel on the bird feeder.

As she stared at the little rodent, she felt like she was back in the woods again, memories taking over her.

Hunger was eating at her insides. Eleven couldn't remember the last time she had something good to eat, probably the last time Mike had brought down Eggo's almost a month ago now.

A searing pain stabbed her heart and Eleven focused on the task at hand. Thinking about Mike hurt too much. That was a pain she couldn't handle, so she had to push it aside. She needed to concentrate on surviving. She was protecting him by staying away, she had to keep telling herself that.

She spotted a squirrel searching around in the snow for its own source of food, and Eleven seized the opportunity. Using her powers, she slammed it against a large tree and it fell to the ground, twitching for a second before the life went out of it.

Immediately, she got together the driest wood she could find and started a fire, using her powers to rub two sticks together fast enough to create a spark. She'd had a bit of practice at this now since she'd been out here for a while and she knew to have some small dry pieces ready for that spark.

She roasted the squirrel over the fire until she heard a twig snap behind

her. Her eyes shot towards the sound, landing on an older man with a gun. Eleven didn't like guns. Only bad men had guns.

"Hey, I'm not gonna hurt you," he told her, but she didn't believe him.

"What's your name? What're you doing out here in the cold?" the man continued, taking several slow steps towards her. She didn't like the way he was looking at her, but she liked the look of his hat and coat.

Using her powers, Eleven lifted a fiery log and shot it towards him, hitting him square in the face and knocking him out. She quickly yanked the jacket off him and snatched his hat before running away as fast as she could, the squirrel forgotten.

Eleven's attention returned to the present as the squirrel leapt off the bird feeder. She didn't want to look out there again, so she pulled the shades down quickly.

After an embarrassing day in his costume and almost being killed by Madmax's older brother on top of the already never-ending pain of being without El, Mike met the party at the cul-de-sac on Maple Street, aka in front of his house.

Mike was really going to try to have fun tonight. But he couldn't help thinking how much fun El would have with them. She had never gotten to go trick or treating and experience Halloween. The usual sharp sting pierced his heart whenever he thought of her, but Mike sighed heavily, pushing it aside.

The night got off to a pretty good start. The guys were able to distract him for the most part and they were getting a pretty good haul of candy so far.

As they were walking away from their latest house, Lucas couldn't help but complain dramatically, "If I get another Three Musketeers, I'm going to kill myself."

"What's wrong with Three Musketeers?" Dustin asked, his tone offended.

"What's wrong with Three Musketeers?" Lucas asked in disbelief as

was his habit.

"No one likes Three Musketeers," Mike agreed, as did Will,

"Yeah, it's just nougat."

"Just nougat? Just nougat? It's top three for me," Dustin contended.

"Top three?" Lucas said incredulously.

"Top three," Dustin confirmed.

"Oh god, give me a break," Mike said exasperatedly, enjoying the banter nonetheless.

"Seriously, I could eat a whole bowl of nougat, straight up," Dustin continued, undeterred by their bashing of his favorite candy.

In a flash of black and white, someone in a Michael Myers mask jumped out in front of them and screamed, Mike's heart stopped in surprise for a second and he inhaled sharply.

But when the person pulled off their mask Mike recognized that shocking red hair anywhere: Madmax. His surprise turned into irritation instantly.

"Holy shit! You've seen the look on your faces," she teased, holding a pretty convincing fake knife. Then, she turned to Lucas, "And you? Who screams like that? You sound like a little girl."

Mike never understood this jab when girls said it... weren't they insulting themselves? He didn't think about it that much. It was kind of true anyway. Lucas had quite the high-pitched scream.

Max turned to walk away, but then she seemed to have sensed that none of them were following her so she turned.

"Hey, you guys coming or not? I heard we should hit up Loch Nora, that's where the rich people live, right?"

Dustin and Lucas seemed thrilled, rushing to catch up to her. Mike had a sneaking suspicion that they had invited her to go trick or

treating with them behind his back. Even Will didn't seem the least bit surprised that Max was joining them now. Was everybody in on this but him? Mike followed them unwillingly, his irritation simmering.

Eleven wasn't sure how long she had sat on the couch watching TV, but at some point she had found a black and white movie called, 'Frankenstein,' to watch. The monster kind of reminded her of...well her.

A doctor, like Papa, had done bad things to try and make the perfect human and ended up creating a monster, a monster that seemed only capable of hurting people. She was the monster. No matter how many times Mike had told her she wasn't, Eleven knew the truth.

Beeping sounded from the radio above the TV and Eleven threw the blanket off her to run to it. She listened to the beeps, Morse Code, as Hopper had called it and looked at the chart on the wall, touching each letter with her finger, "L...A...T...E...Late."

Her heart fell. She knew he was late, but he was going to be even later apparently. It was well past 5-1-5. 5:15.

This happened every time. Eleven was tired of it. All he did was lie to her. It made her wonder why she had come to live with him at all.

The thick coat and hat blocked out some of the cold, but certainly not all of it, especially at night. She felt bad for stealing from the man, but she didn't think she'd be able to survive out here much longer without warm clothes. Even still, her legs were exposed to the frigid air and snow.

She walked through the woods with a fox she had managed to kill for dinner tonight when she came upon a box. She thought it was a strange thing to see in the middle of the woods, but there it was. She approached it carefully, sweeping the snow off it and lifting the lid. Inside were a couple of Eggo's and a container, presumably with food in it. Her heart began pounding hard in her chest in excitement. Only one person gave her Eggo's... could it be...? Was it...? Mike?

Whoever it was, she glanced around and saw that they weren't around.

Without thinking, Eleven snatched up the food and ran, fearful that maybe it wasn't Mike, maybe someone had left it there as a trap.

So, basically Hopper was treating her exactly how Lucas had said almost a year ago, that she was just a dog looking for a warm bed and something to eat. Well, Hopper was mistaken if he thought she couldn't take care of herself. She had done it before and she could do it again if she had to.

By this point, Mike's annoyance had transformed into full blown anger. He hung back away from Lucas, Dustin, and Max and walked next to Will, still fuming.

"Did you agree to this?" Mike asked, unfazed by the fact that Will was recording him.

"What?" Will seemed to be oblivious but had the decency to lower the video camera.

"To her, joining our party?" Mike elaborated, but even the diplomat Will tried to placate him,

"It's just for Halloween."

"They should've checked with me," Mike muttered, glaring at the three of them ahead.

"Well, they were excited, and I guess I thought you'd be okay with it," Will tried to explain but Mike wouldn't hear it. There was only one girl that was allowed in their party and she was gone. There wasn't any room for this girl, even if it was for only one night.

"She's ruining the best night of the year." Mike knew it was harsh, but it was true.

Mike practically stomped up the driveway to the next house, not looking back at Will's reaction.

Why was it that last year when he wanted El to be in the party, Lucas had given him such shit about it, but all of sudden this girl shows up and it's all great. Like El never existed.

At the door, Mike noticed that Will was no longer with them. He knew about his episodes, so he scanned the darkness, worried about their friend. When he didn't see him, dread filled Mike's chest. He had just been a total jerk to Will. Mike felt like he was supposed to be watching out for the smallest member of their party, Lucas and Dustin definitely weren't, and he had failed.

Mike ran back around, searching around where he had left Will and eventually he found him sitting on the ground behind a brick retaining wall, his knees hugged tightly to his chest, rocking back and forth.

"Will? Will! What's wrong? I couldn't find you. Are you hurt?" Mike said breathlessly, kneeling in front of him, gripping his shoulders, and trying to see into his friend's eyes.

"Holy shit." Mike heard Dustin, Lucas, and Max approaching by Dustin's swear.

"Is he okay?" Lucas asked concerned.

"I don't know," Mike snapped back, before turning back to Will, "I'm gonna get you home, okay? I'm gonna get you home, hold on."

"Take it easy," Dustin moved as if to help when Mike took Will by the shoulders and lifted him up, but Mike asserted,

"I got him, I got him."

"Mike."

"Keep trick or treating. I'm bored anyways," Mike told them, angry at them and angry at himself for not being there for his friend. The guys backed off and Mike walked Will back to his house. They went straight to the basement and Mike could tell that his friend was embarrassed but after annihilating the majority of their candy, Will felt calm enough to tell Mike what was happening.

"It's like, like I'm stuck," Will explained.

"Like stuck in the Upside Down?" Mike tried, but Will shook his head slightly, his eyes had a faraway look in them as if trying to come up

with a better way to illustrate his point.

"No... you know how on a View-Master when it gets..." Will gestured with his hands, having difficulty with the words.

"Caught between two slides?" Mike filled in and this time Will nodded.

"Yeah, yeah, like that. One slide is our world and the other, the other slide is the Upside Down," Will described, that haunted look in his eyes still there. "And there was this noise...coming from everywhere, and then I saw something..."

"The Demogorgon?" Mike asked, his heart pounding in anticipation of Will's answer. Maybe if Will could see the Demogorgon and it was alive, then maybe El was alive too and he could see her too.

"No, it was like this huge shadow in the sky... only it was alive, and it was coming for me," Will corrected, a shiver seeming to run through him. Mike felt a little guilty at his disappointment. He shouldn't want Will to see the Demogorgon or use his traumatic episodes so he could find El...but he did. And he was ashamed of himself.

"Is it all real? Or like how the doctor's say, all in your head?" Mike didn't want to minimize Will's feelings, but he hadn't seen any kind of shadow when he was in the Upside Down last year and El had never mentioned anything like that.

"I don't know... just... please don't tell the others, okay? They won't understand," Will requested, turning to look at Mike now, and he could see the fear in his friend's eyes. The others didn't need to know right now, plus they'd probably tease him. El would be able to help him if she were here.

Mike looked away from Will, he never could meet anyone's gaze when he thought about El. He was afraid it would give away how much pain he was still in over a girl he had only know for one week almost a year ago. But, he said just above a whisper,

"Eleven would."

"She would?"

Finding the words to talk about El was always a challenge, but lately it seemed to be getting more and more difficult. Maybe it was because they were approaching the anniversary of the day he found her or maybe it was because she had never felt further from him.

Mike swallowed hard, but his words still came out gravelly with emotion as he confided in his friend, "Yeah, she always did. Sometimes I feel like I still see her, like she's still around... but she never is. I don't know. Sometimes I feel like I'm going crazy."

"Me too," Will said, his voice sounded a little stained as well.

"Hey, well, if we're both going crazy we'll go crazy together, right?" Mike tried to lighten the mood but it just left them both in pain on the edge of tears. But Will agreed with a watery smile,

"Yeah, crazy together."

Eleven heard him do the knock twice, but at first she chose not to let him in.

"Hey kid, open up, all right? Look, I know I'm late. I got candy here, all right. I got all the good stuff," Hopper could be heard shouting from outside. She pretended like she hadn't heard him.

"Please, will you open the door? I'm going to freeze to death out here," he continued, punctuating each word with a slap of his hand against the door, but she just continued to watch TV, unlocking the doors.

Even from behind the closed door of her room, she could hear him enter the little cabin. He made his way over to her door and knocked, but this was a door she wouldn't open, "Hey, kid, Open up, would ya?"

"I-uh- got stuck somewhere and I lost track of time and I'm sorry. El, would you please open the door? El?" Hopper's explanations falling on deaf ears. "All right, I'm just gonna be out here by myself eating all this candy. I'm gonna get fat. It's very unhealthy to leave me out

here. I could have a heart attack or something. But you know, you do what you want."

She would do what she wanted, and what she wanted was to see Mike.

Earlier, she had wheeled the TV in her room, thankful for the long cord, in preparation for her nightly ritual. Eleven flipped through the channels until she came to what she was looking for, to the white noise. She tied a strip of cloth around her head and focused all her thoughts on the dark-haired boy, it wasn't hard when her thoughts were always on him.

Instantly, she was in the place in her mind where there was Mike and her and no one else.

Even though she had done this for 301 days, seeing Mike always had the same effect on her: her heart would race, her breathing would become unsteady, and her throat would become dry. Not to mention those butterflies that were fluttering around in her stomach.

In the silence of her mind, his calming voice rang clearly, "It's day 353. I had a bad day today."

Her chest ached at his words; why did he have a bad day? Was he okay? Did somebody hurt him? She would kill them.

All of these thoughts circled around in her consciousness as she continued to approach him. She could see he was still in his Halloween costume, she guessed because Mike usually wore t-shirts with a collar and he was in tan outfit that was all one piece. It did kind of look like the outfit the men wore in the commercial for Ghostbusters. She thought he looked pretty- handsome, as Hopper told her was the word for boys who were pretty.

"I don't know, I guess I wish you were here. I mean, we all do. If you're out there, please just give me a sign," Mike sounded so defeated. He had asked her this, or something very similar to this, every day she had listened to him, and every day she almost broke those stupid rules and let him know she was there, that she wished she was there with him too.

After all of Hopper's lies, today, Eleven was done with his stupid rules. There was no way the bad people were still looking for her. And how was she really protecting Mike anyway if she was making his heart hurt? She didn't know how much longer he would wait for her either, so she needed him to know she was alive and still waiting for the day she could see him again in real life.

She came to kneel right in front of him, willing him to see her, even though she knew that wasn't how her powers worked. But as if he could feel her presence, Mike turned his head to look at her, confusion coloring his brown eyes.

Her breath caught in her throat as he looked right into her eyes. Even if he couldn't really see her, she could see him, and it made her heart ache to see his warm brown eyes staring back at her.

She managed to fill her lungs with enough oxygen for one word, "Mike."

The confused arch of his eyebrow deepened slightly, and she was sure he heard her.

"Eleven?" he said her name and a thrill of excitement ran through her.

Without thinking, Eleven reached her hand up slowly. She wanted to touch him, needed to touch him. Her fingers came within an inch of his face when all of a sudden, he turned away and she jerked her hand away quickly.

Mike then slammed the antenna back into the Supercomm and pushed himself up, walking away from her. Eleven watched him leave, her heart feeling like it was leaving with him, being torn from her body.

The pain was too much. She couldn't do this anymore. She ripped her blindfold off, tears already pooling in her eyes, threatening to spill over. Her face crumpled and those tears streamed down her cheeks, blood dripping from her nose onto her upper lip.

A/N: Wow! You guys are awesome! Thank you so much for amazing reviews for the first chapter of this! This season is significantly harder to write and I hope that I am able to hold your interest with added Mike and Eleven feels while still staying true to the plot of the season. Like with my season 1 story, most of it is all already written and just requires some tweaking, so I should be able to post chapters pretty regularly. Maybe not every day but hopefully pretty close. As always, let me know how I'm doing! And thanks again for all of your support!

3. Chapter 3: The Pollywog

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CHAPTER 3: THE POLLYWOG

This time around Eleven hid behind a tree to see who was putting food in the box. She had to know if it was a trap or not.

Or if it was Mike.

Unsure when this person was putting food in the box, Eleven staked out the location all day long, waiting patiently to see if it was the bad men just trying to trick her into revealing herself. It was late into the night when she heard the crunch of boots on freshly fallen snow, and Eleven snuck a little closer, making sure to stay hidden behind the trunk of one of the larger trees. She watched with bated breath as the person neared, a big person, definitely a man, judging by his size and stature.

That wasn't Mike.

Disappointment ate at her insides worse than the clawing hunger she was currently experiencing, but nevertheless, she refused to take her eyes off of the stranger.

As he neared, the man's features began to take shape: a hat, a slight beard, and if she wasn't mistaken, a uniform underneath his heavy jacket. The uniform wasn't like the bad men's outfits at the lab, no, this outfit she recognized right away. This was Chief Hopper. The policeman who had helped them fight off the bad men, prepare the bath so she could find Will, and then, she hoped, went into the Upside Down and saved Will. But he may have also told the bad men where she was that night at the gym... how else would they have found her?

It was blisteringly cold outside, and she didn't know how much longer she would survive. So, she followed him as he walked away. She honestly didn't know if he could be trusted but he wasn't one of the bad men. Dustin had kept calling him Lando, but she didn't know what that meant.

She got the impression that Dustin thought this man had been working with the bad men, but she didn't really have a choice at this point. She might have even gone with the bad men in order to get out of the cold and eat something.

So, Eleven decided to follow him and hope he wouldn't betray her. She was so desperate for warmth. When he reached the familiar truck, the one Mike had held her hand in, she paused as he turned to look at her. He didn't really look scared, just surprised, as he took off his hat and stared at her in disbelief.

"Rise and shine," the familiar voice awakened her from her dream memories. Immediately, she remembered the events of last night, his continued lies. She rolled away from him, letting him know her displeasure.

While she was grateful he had taken her out of the cold, Eleven was beginning to feel like this was only a slightly better situation than the lab. But it was nothing in comparison to living in Mike's fort. That sharp pain returned thinking of her mind visit with Mike last night and it only made her feel worse.

"So, that's it? You're still not talking?" she heard him ask.

"All right, I guess I'm just going to have to-uh- enjoy this triple decker Eggo extravaganza on my own," he said, and she could tell he was trying to sound off-hand.

As mad as she was at him, she couldn't say no to Eggo's. She had been in this world long enough to know that he was trying to make up for his lies with food. But she was hungry, so she got out of bed, dressed, and came to the table.

Hopper had put Halloween candy all over the Eggo's with whipped cream, and she would be lying if she said it didn't look delicious.

"Mhmm! Good, right?" he asked her with exaggeration. It only increased her annoyance with him, but she silently picked up one of the Eggo's with her fork and took a bite out of it.

"You know the great thing about it is that it's only eight thousand

calories," he continued, but she didn't really understand or care to understand what he was talking about, glaring over at him. Did he not even feel bad about breaking his promises anymore?

When she was with Mike and his friends promises meant something. They were something that were never supposed to be broken. So, why was it that Hopper was making and breaking promises every single day? Why even make a promise if you couldn't keep it?

She watched as his eyes fell over to the TV cord running into her room and he turned back to look at her. She could tell he already knew but he was just waiting to ask her about it.

"You visited him again last night?"

Eleven looked away. They had this conversation on a regular basis and it hurt every time. She had to see Mike, he knew that, so why did he always make her feel bad about it? It wasn't like Mike knew she was there, anyway, as evidenced by him looking right at her yesterday and walking away just before she could touch his cheek.

Every time she thought of the dark-haired boy, fresh waves of pain crashed over her, drowning her with emotion. She would give anything to see him again, in real life. She was somewhat placated by the fact that she knew he was safe, even if he was obviously no longer the happy boy she remembered. That was her fault. But he didn't even have that luxury. He had no idea that she was even alive, and Eleven felt his pain. She didn't want to imagine what it would feel like not to know whether Mike was alive and okay.

"He says he needs me," she told him, her voice quiet, knowing that Hopper didn't care at all about her feelings for Mike. It wasn't that he didn't understand, it was that he did, and didn't think they were important.

"Want me to go check on him?" Hopper asked, his voice a shade softer. He was missing the point. Mike wasn't in any danger from what she could tell. Hopper going to see him would do nothing for the agony she was in at being apart from him for so long.

So, she shook her head, feeling the darkness creep into her heart as it

always did when the reality of being stuck here sunk in.

"I know that you miss him, all right? But it's too dangerous," Hopper said, staring at her from across the table and she looked back up at him, the anger beginning to simmer at his words. "You're the last thing he needs right now."

This was something he said to her every time. It was too dangerous. It was too dangerous. But in all the time she had visited Mike in her mind, she had never seen him in any danger. The bad men probably thought she was dead, like Mike would soon enough, and even so, she knew Mike would never hand her over to the bad men... not like Hopper had probably done before. Every time Hopper said it was too dangerous, it felt like he was using her feelings for Mike against her. As though, if she really cared about him, then she shouldn't want to put him in danger by visiting him.

"You're gonna see him...soon. And not just in that head of yours, you're gonna see him in real life. I feel like I'm making progress with these people," he told her and then she was done. If this had been the first or even second time she had heard this lie then maybe it would've been different, but all he did was make her believe that she could see him when he never let her go anywhere.

"Friends don't lie," she said, keeping her voice as steady as possible against the torrent of emotions coursing through her. She was sad and hopeful and angry and tired. She couldn't just sit here anymore like a prisoner. At least in the woods she was free. Cold and hungry, but free.

"What?" he said, seemingly taken aback at her reaction, confusion creasing his brow.

"You say soon on day 21, you say soon on day 205, you now say soon on day 326," she challenged, leaning forward and glaring at him.

She remembered those days clearly. Day 21 was the first day she realized she could find Mike in her mind just using the TV. She would never forget the feeling of seeing his pain for the first time, it tore at her soul. In a way it was also comforting because she could see he hadn't given up on her, but all she wanted to do was take away that

pain. Hopper had come home in the middle and they had a huge fight then too. But he had said she would see him soon, so she had been patient. Similarly, on Day 205, Eleven had listened as Mike told her about his birthday and the only gift he wanted was to know she was alive and safe. That had been the closest she had ever been, up until last night, to reaching out with her powers and letting him know she was there. But Hopper again said soon, so she was patient. Well, she was done being patient.

"What is this? You're like counting the days now like some kind of prisoner?" he replied, defensively and she could tell she was right by the way he looked away from her and busied himself with putting something in his pocket. It only made her angrier.

"When is soon?" she pushed. She needed to know how long she was going to live in this agony without Mike, how long Mike would be sad.

"Soon is when it's not dangerous anymore," he replied purposefully looking away from her.

Her anger was quickly turning to full blown rage. He never had any intentions of letting her leave here. He just wanted to keep her here like she was his dog, only coming by to teach her some tricks and feed her. At least dogs got to go outside every once in a while.

"When?" she practically growled at him, forcing him to look at her briefly.

"I don't know," he admitted, glancing down at his shirt pocket again.

"On day 500?"

"I don't know."

"On day 600?"

"I don't know."

"On day 700?! On day 800?!" she continued as if he wasn't speaking at all, slamming her hands on the table, "I NEED TO SEE HIM!"

"Jesus, I said, I don't-," he began speaking at the same time as her and it was the last straw. She used her powers effortlessly to throw the plate of Eggo's at him, covering him in whipped cream and chocolate. He shot up from his chair and looked down at what she had done to his uniform, but she didn't care.

"SHIT! SHIT!" he yelled at her.

Standing from her seat as well, she snarled, "Friends don't lie," before stomping into her room and slamming the door with her powers.

As soon as she was alone in her room, the adrenaline began to seep out of her, but it wasn't until she heard Hopper leave the cabin that she allowed herself to let go. She buried her face into her pillow and sobs wracked her body. She had no idea how long she cried but eventually her tears slowed and eventually stopped and she was left feeling hollow and alone.

Day 354.

Mike sat in Mr. Clarke's class, it was actually an interesting class, they were discussing the case of Phineas Gage and how that metal bar changed his behavior but he had stopped taking notes on the lecture about five minutes into the lesson but he couldn't stop thinking about his call to El last night. It had been just as he described to Will earlier, he had felt like El was right there with him. Even though he was aware of how ridiculous it was, Mike couldn't stop replaying the moment in his head on a constant loop.

Jonathan had come and picked Will up around 9, so Mike's call to El was significantly later than usual. As soon as Will stepped out of his basement Mike made his way over to her fort and settled down inside. He hadn't even bothered to change out of his costume, but it didn't matter, he just needed to speak to her.

Picking up the Supercomm, Mike reported the usual date, but he couldn't keep the defeat from his tone, 'It's day 353. I had a bad day today.'

He had wanted to tell her about all of the fun he and the guys had had trick or treating, but the night had been ruined. It had gotten off to a bad

start when Lucas had insisted on being Venkman too and then just snowballed when Dustin and Lucas invited Madmax to trick or treat with them without asking him first. Sure, Mike knew he had been distant lately and he could be a jerk but that was only because none of them understood what he was going through. Couldn't they see adding a random girl to their party without telling him would upset him? If Mike had to live in a world without El then at least he wanted to live it as it was, not by his friends replacing her with someone new.

'I don't know, I guess I wish you were here. I mean, we all do. If you're out there, please just give me a sign,' Mike had begged. He didn't know how much longer he could keep doing this to himself.

Intellectually, Mike knew that she could find anyone with her mind, so if she really were around she would have been able to let him know she was there. But she never did, so that must mean...

But then, he felt her. Slightly off to his left but close, Mike felt her there. As if by a magnet his eyes were drawn to that spot and he strained his ears to hear anything, anything at all that may indicate she was there.

'Mike.'

He swore he had heard her soft voice calling to him. He must really be going crazy.

'Eleven?' he called back, but he received no response in return. He heard nothing, but there was this feeling of..of... he didn't know how else to describe it but a feeling of electricity close to his left cheek. Nevertheless, he stayed frozen in that position for several long seconds, holding his breath lest he miss hearing her.

He was being stupid. Will was right. They really were going crazy together and Mike was mad at himself for always allowing himself to believe she was there, listening to him.

He slammed the antenna back in and stomped away, the electricity fizzling out.

The loud bang of the classroom door flying open, startled Mike out of his daydream. Dustin came in, disrupting the lecture, and apologized

all the way to his chair. Mike had been wondering where he was; he had just figured that Dustin had a stomachache from eating too much Halloween candy last night.

Dustin continued to make a scene as he whispered loudly that they needed to meet after school for AV Club because he had something he wanted to show them, and Mike didn't argue. It was either be miserable at home or distract himself so he chose the latter.

Eleven didn't even have the heart to get out of bed or use her powers to turn on the TV for that matter. All she could hear was the sound of the birds outside, reminding her that she was in a cage and they were free. She just laid in bed, thinking of all the lies Hopper told her over the last 326 days.

Mike wouldn't lie to her. Mike could tell her the truth and still try and protect her. And the only time Mike had locked her away was to keep her hidden from his mom and he had kept his promise. He hadn't told his mom about her and he had come back to let her out. He let her leave the fort and the basement and he didn't try to keep her prisoner. He kept her safe. He was the only one who could make her feel more than halfway happy.

So, Eleven took the fabric she had been using as a blindfold and tied it around her eyes, but she hadn't even begun to use her powers. It wouldn't be enough this time. If she waited for Hopper to say it was no longer dangerous she may never see Mike in real life.

Ripping off the blindfold angrily, Eleven grabbed her jacket, glancing around the living space, to make sure no one was around, she made her way to the door. Her eyes fell on the multiple locks she had become so used to locking and unlocking with her powers that she barely had to think. It reminded her of the first time Hopper had brought her here and he put those locks on the door.

Day 1.

They really hadn't driven that far, but the roads had been bumpy. The truck was warm, and she wasn't anxious to leave it, even as the Chief came to a stop in seemingly the middle of nowhere. He stepped out of the

truck and she was unsure if she was supposed to follow him until he came around and opened the door for her.

They trekked a little further into the woods and there was a small wooden structure. It definitely wasn't the lab, and it was a shelter which is all Eleven cared about at that moment. But it also wasn't nearly as nice as her fort because it didn't have Mike.

She watched as the older man kicked his boots on the door frame and she mimicked him to keep the snow from being tracked in.

"My grandad used to live here a long time ago. I mainly just use it for storage now," the Chief told her as he stepped into the small building.

"Lot of history here," he continued, as she glanced around the space, taking in the cobwebs and layers of dust.

"So, uh, what do you think? It's a work in progress. It takes a little imagination, but, uh, you know, once we fix it up it's gonna be nice, real nice," he explained before telling her with a slight smile, "It's your new home."

"Home," she said, still hollow and cold, partly from being out in the wilderness for so long, but partly because how could anything that wasn't near Mike feel like home?

They settled in a bit and she took off her coat and hat once he got a fire started.

"Yeah, yeah, all right. This is music," he said, grabbing some kind of flat square object and pulling a flat, circle object out of it. He put it in something that looked like a box and then all of a sudden loud sound came out of it.

It startled her a little at first, but the sound was pleasant. So, this was music. The Chief started moving around weird and she stared at him confused by his strange demeanor. He looked happy though, so she guessed nothing was seriously wrong with him.

"All right, let's get to work!" he ordered.

They spent all of Day 1 cleaning up the space, she even learned how to

sweep. It was kind of nice, making a home. And then she found out she would have a bed. It was nice, she liked it, of course. But she couldn't help but think about Mike's promise of having a bed in his basement. Maybe Mike could visit her here where the bad men couldn't find them.

The next few days, Hopper, as he told her to call him, taught her a lot of things. He taught her Morse Code as he called the beep language with the radio, he taught her how to read the letters it made. She got to do fun things, like make puzzles and build a trip wire. Hopper had explained how it worked to her, "Now this is called a trip wire. It's like an alarm. You, uh, set it up like this and if anyone gets close. It's gonna make a loud noise, like, uh, gunfire. BANG!" he punctuated his point with the sound of a gunshot which she was all too familiar with and its suddenness surprised her.

She wasn't scared just startled but he thought she was.

"Those bad men aren't gonna find you, all right? Not way the hell out here," he told her. "Just gotta take some precautions. There's gonna be a couple ground rules."

She didn't like the sound of that. Papa had rules. They were all bad. Mike didn't have any rules for her. He never tried to control her.

"Rule number one, always keep the curtains drawn. Rule number two, only open the door if you hear my secret knock," he demonstrated the knock on the table, rapping his knuckles on the wood two times, then once, then finally three times.

"And rule number three, don't ever go out alone, especially in the daylight."

"That's it, three rules. I call them the, uh, don't be stupid rules, because we aren't stupid, right?"

"Not stupid," Eleven muttered to herself, as she approached the trip wire. She had broken all the other rules already by unlocking the locks, opening the curtains, and going out in the daylight, what was one more?

She hated that Hopper thought that her wanting to be free was

stupid. She had been locked up her entire life, but Mike had given her a taste of what it could be like to be truly free, and she wanted that feeling back.

So, Eleven stepped over the wire.

"His name is D'Artagnon," Dustin told them as he opened the box.

Mike stared down in it with everyone else and saw the small amphibian-like creature. It gave him a weird vibe. He immediately felt a negative energy around the thing as Dustin reached down and pulled it out for them all to see.

"Cute, right?"

"D'Artagnon?" Mike asked in disbelief. He was familiar with the name, it was one of the Three Musketeers. But why would he name a weird slimy frog thing after the Three Musketeers?

"Dart, for short," Dustin clarified.

"And he was in your trash?" Max asked slowly, trying to wrap her brain around it too. Mike was a little annoyed by her presence since he still wasn't willing to acknowledge that she was a member of the party, but he tolerated her for now.

"Foraging for food," Dustin suspected, then seemed to get an idea. "Want to hold him?"

"No, no, no," Max straightened up and away from the table slightly at his suggestion.

"He doesn't bite, don't worry," Dustin assured her, shoving the little creature into her unwilling hands.

"Oh god, he's slimy!" she exclaimed, quickly passing the creature off to the nearest person, that happened to be Lucas.

"He's like a living booger," Lucas said with disgust, in turn passing him to Will across the table.

"Ah, oh, god!" Will wasted no time passing it to Mike to his right.

Mike, unafraid and not easily grossed out, held the creature steady and lifted it to his eye-level to study it closer, asking, "What is he?"

"My question exactly," Dustin said with a smile, clearly intrigued by the challenge of researching Dart. After carefully taking the creature from Mike, Dustin placed him back in the ghost trap, and then dug out the various books he had acquired from the library on the subject.

"At first, I thought he was some type of pollywog-," Dustin began, but Max cut him off to ask,

"Pollywog?"

"It's another word for tadpole," Dustin explained. "A tadpole's the larval stage of a toad."

"I know what a tadpole is," Max told him defensively.

"All right, then you know that most tadpoles are aquatic, right? Well, Dart, he isn't. He doesn't need water," Dustin continued, undeterred.

"Yeah, but aren't there non-aquatic pollywogs?" Lucas asked.

"Terrestrial pollywogs?" Dustin answered, "Yep, there's two to be exact. *Indirana Semipalmata* and the *Andenomerra Andreae*. One's from India, one's from South America, so how did one end up in my trash?"

"Maybe some scientists brought here and it escaped?" Max suggested the most likely scenario, which was still pretty far-fetched. As she spoke, Mike looked down, studying Dart when he saw something.

"Do you guys see that?" Mike said, drawing their attention to the creature. "Looks like something is moving inside of it."

Mike moved the light over to see it more closely and the little creature wailed and jumped off the table. Luckily, Dustin was quick and shot out a hand to catch it.

An icy shiver had run up Mike's spine at the whine the little creature had made...it was unlike any sound of any animal he'd ever heard and yet... Mike felt like he had heard that sound before.

"Whoa! It's okay, I got you, little guy. I know you don't like that. It's okay," Dustin comforted the thing before remembering something. "And there's another thing, reptiles are cold blooded, ectothermic, right? They love the heat, the sun. Dart hates it, it hurts him."

"So... if it's not a pollywog or a reptile...," Lucas' words trailed off unable to come up with what this thing could possibly be.

"Then I've discovered a new species," Dustin stated proudly, flashing them all a toothy smile.

The ringing of the bell got all of their attentions and they scrambled to gather their things. Dustin put Dart back in the ghost catcher and they all exited the AV room, Lucas asserting, "We've gotta show him to Mr. Clarke."

"No! What if he steals my discovery?" Dustin argued back.

"He's not gonna steal your discovery," Mike scoffed.

"You know I'm thinking of calling it Dustonius Pollywogus. What do you think?" Dustin proposed glancing over at Max, anxious for her approval.

"I think you're an idiot," she replied. Mike shot a look over at her. He thought that was little mean even if she was joking, but Dustin didn't seemed bothered in the slightest.

"You know, when I get rich and famous one day, don't come crawling back to me saying, 'Oh my gosh, Dustin, I'm so sorry for being mean to you back in in eighth grade, oh my god'" Dustin said in a mock girly voice as they continued down the hall.

Mike had stopped listening to them and parted ways to head to algebra, but he couldn't get over the sound that thing had made, familiar and haunting.

Eleven wasn't sure how far she had walked or for how long. The only thing she was aware of was how her shoes crunched on the dry leaves in the woods and how the sound did nothing to quell her anger.

But then came a different sound.

Pausing briefly so she could hear, Eleven strained her ears and she heard a woman's voice, it was a happy one. As Eleven neared she caught sight of the woman and a young girl playing outside of a house. It must be a mother and her child. This realization caused another painful memory to surface.

"I would feel so sad if I thought I was a disappointment to her—because she didn't live very long after that, you see. She died of fever when I was just three months old. I do wish she'd lived long enough for me to remember calling her mother. I think it would be so sweet to say 'mother,'" Hopper read to her. But the question had burned inside of her for some time now and she interrupted.

"Do I have a mother?" she asked hesitantly. Despite Hopper reading to her when he was here, she was still trying to learn to effectively communicate. All of the language she had learned from Papa in the lab was solely for accomplishing the goal of listening to people and repeating back what they said. Once she had figured out how to relay what she was hearing to the radios in the real world, she didn't even need that.

Hopper looked up at her at her question, stroking his chin thoughtfully.

"Yeah, of course you have a mother. You couldn't really be born without one," he said as if it was the most obvious thing in the world. Mike never did that to her. But she ignored his tone because she needed the answer.

As Hopper looked back down at the book and opened his mouth to continue reading, Eleven asked, unsatisfied with his response, "Where is she?"

After a slight hesitation, his eyes flicked away from her briefly, but eventually he responded, "She's not around anymore."

Her heart sunk at his response and she could already feel the back of her

eyes begin to burn with unshed tears.

"Gone?" her voice was soft, her throat closing up with emotion.

"Yeah," he confirmed, offering some sympathy, "I'm sorry about that, kid."

He watched her for a moment, but she just looked at the ceiling as the tears began to spill over her eyelids. She hated crying. She hated it in the lab where she only cried when she was put in the dark room, and she hated it here in the real world, where she had cried more than her entire life. Usually because she missed Mike.

Now, she had lived in the world long enough to realize what she had been missing her entire life. Freedom, a Papa that didn't use her, a home, Eggo's, a Mike... and now a Mama. Her thoughts always returned to the hard truth that girls named Eleven don't get to have Papas or Mamas that cared about them and especially not Mikes. Sometimes she wondered if it would have been better to stay in the lab and never know that these things existed and everyone else seemed to have them but her. But, no. That thought was always quickly pushed away because no matter how much she missed Mike, at least she had met him, and that was worth all of the pain the world.

Eleven silently wiped the tears from her cheek with her hand. There was no use crying. She had no Mama. No Papa. No friends. No Mike. She had Hopper, who fed her and tried to give her a home and teach her things, but it just wasn't the same.

The man averted his eyes back down to the book and continued reading as if their exchange had never happened, "And father died four days afterwards from fever too. That left me an orphan and folks were at their wits' end, so Mrs. Thomas said, what to do with me. You see, nobody wanted me even then. It seems to be my fate."

Eleven felt she and Anne were very similar in that way. Orphans that nobody wanted, not really. Plenty of people wanted her powers but who really wanted her?

"Is your mom here? Sweetie?" the woman's nice voice got her attention. Eleven noticed that they had stopped playing and had approached her, the mother holding her daughter's hand.

What Eleven wouldn't give for that. But all this sad was making her very angry. Why *couldn't* she have that?

"School... Where is school?" Eleven managed, trying to get a hold of her emotions.

"The school...it's-uh- it's about a mile that way, at least," the woman replied, pointing off to her left. Eleven could tell she was wary of her, but she had more important things to worry about, like how she was going to get to Mike. But the nice woman wasn't done, "Where are your parents?"

For some reason this stranger's concern made Eleven very mad. She could tell the woman was trying to help her, but Eleven didn't need help or parents. She just needed Mike. Mike would make everything better.

In order to get out of the situation, Eleven used her power to push the swing until it wrapped itself tightly around the upper frame.

"Look, Mommy! Look!" the little girl called for her mother.

Eleven used the distraction she had created and left quickly, determined to see Mike.

At the end of the school day, Mike made his way over to his locker to drop off the books he didn't need and the stuff he would need for homework. But he probably wouldn't do it, if he was being honest with himself.

Will was behind him at his own locker and Mike called over to him, "Will, you coming? Let's go show Mr. Clark."

His friend seemed to hesitate as he turned to look over at him, approaching him slowly with a strange look on his pale face.

"What?" Mike asked, wondering what Will's deal was as he stopped right in front of him. Mike was significantly taller than Will and growing more every day, so he had to look down at his much shorter friend. When he got no response Mike repeated, "What?"

"It's about D'Artagnon," Will said finally, his eyes haunted. Mike looked at Will with concern and in a hushed voice Will explained how he had seen something similar to Dart last year and had heard that sound during one of his episodes. Will's revelation just validated Mike's first impression of the creature. That creature's wail had given him a bad feeling and it was obviously upsetting Will too, so there had to be something to that.

Mike immediately knew they couldn't let them show this creature to Mr. Clarke. They needed to figure this out first or they could be putting their favorite teacher in danger. So, Mike sprinted down the hall towards the science classroom, Will a few paces behind, and threw the door open, rushing inside.

"STOP! I'm really sorry, Mr. Clarke, it was just some stupid prank!" Mike apologized breathlessly, snatching the ghost catcher with the thing in it and clutching it to his chest.

"What the hell?" Dustin yelled.

"What're you doing?" Lucas asked incredulously.

"We need to go! Right now. RIGHT NOW!" Mike yelled and they all sped after him towards the AV Club room. He felt a little bad leaving Mr. Clarke with no explanation, but he'd thank them when he was alive.

As they entered the room it was a fairly unanimous decision to leave Max out of it. It really was for her own safety not to know the events of last year. Plus, Will didn't need everyone knowing his business, especially not some random girl they had met two days ago.

Mike explained what Will had told him, trying to prevent his friend from having to rehash it again. He knew how Lucas and Dustin would question every thing and not believe a word of it. Mike felt a little protective of Will, mostly because they both were still trying to deal with the events of last year and the other two party members just didn't seem to have any idea what they were both still going through.

"Hello? Hello? Guys, can I come in yet?" Max shouted, banging on the door in frustration.

"NO!" Mike roared back in response.

"All right, I don't understand," Lucas said.

"What do you not understand?" Mike had lost his patience. He was tired of Lucas doubting everything. There was a line between being a realist and being a jerk and he was veering towards the latter.

"Will saw something that looked like Dart last year?" Lucas asked with doubt in his voice.

"Kinda... but there was no tail," Will explained tentatively, so Mike jumped in to help.

"Then he heard it yesterday, the exact same sound."

"Why didn't you tell us before?" Dustin asked and Mike didn't like his tone. It was very blamey, like Will was lying because he didn't tell them immediately.

"I wasn't sure," Will tried defending himself but coming off shaky.

"So, it's a coincidence," Dustin deduced incorrectly, so Mike came to his aid again with his own theory.

"Or not. What if when Will was stuck in the Upside Down he somehow acquired True Sight?"

"True Sight?" Lucas asked uncomprehendingly.

"Gives you the power to see into the ethereal plane," Dustin explained as if he were a human D&D manual. Lucas still wasn't getting it though and said with a sigh,

"Elaborate."

"Maybe these episodes that Will keeps having aren't really flashbacks at all. Maybe they're real. Maybe somehow Will can see into the Upside Down," Mike, even as he said this, could feel his excitement building. If Will could see into the Upside Down maybe, just maybe he could use this to find El if she was there, just as she had used her powers to find him last year.

"So, that would mean...", Lucas started but left his sentence hanging, allowing Mike to finish his thought,

"Dart is from the Upside Down."

Now that Lucas understood and seemed to believe them, he told them, "We have to take him to Hopper."

"I agree," Mike concurred quickly, for once on the same page as Lucas when it came to telling adults stuff.

"No, no way. If we take him to Hopper he's as good as dead," Dustin said firmly.

"Maybe he should be dead," Mike argued back heatedly.

"How could you say that?"

"How could you not? He's from the Upside Down!" Mike's anger was building and these days it didn't take much. Something about this creature rubbed him the wrong way and if it was from the Upside Down then it wasn't much of a stretch that it could hurt them but especially Will.

"Maybe. But even if he is, that doesn't automatically mean that he's bad," Dustin tried, but this only made Mike angrier.

"That's like saying just because someone is from the Death Star doesn't make them bad!" Mike tried using a metaphor that Dustin would actually understand and get through his thick skull.

"We have a bond," Dustin replied more softly.

"A bond?! Just because he like nougat?! " Mike could hear his voice getting louder and louder but he didn't care. Dustin was being stupid about this.

"No! Because he trusts me!" Dustin yelled right back.

"He trusts you?" Lucas asked doubtfully.

"Yes! I promised that I would take care of him-," Dustin began but

was quickly cut off.

The ghost catcher rattled and that bone-chilling noise came from it again. It grated on Mike's nerves like fingernails on a chalkboard.

Chalkboard... The image of El crushing the Demogorgon against the chalkboard filled his mind, but Mike didn't have time to think about it any further because the ghost catcher flipped over on its side with a loud bang. In fear and anger, Mike grabbed the first weapon he could find: the microphone for the Heathkit. It wasn't much but it'd have to do.

"Don't hurt him!" Dustin ordered.

"Only if it attacks," Mike fired back, never taking his eyes off of it.

"Just open it already!" Lucas shouted.

Dustin pressed the release button and out popped the creature, twice as large as before.

"Holy shit!"

They all watched in disgusted horror as legs popped out its sides, screeching at them.

"Holy shit!" Lucas swore again.

On pure instinct, Mike raised the microphone, but Dustin diverted his aim, yelling, "NO!"

The creature hopped off the table with his new legs and scampered away quickly, more quickly than anyone would have anticipated having only grown legs mere seconds ago.

At that moment, Max managed to open the door and the thing ran out, scurrying past her and down the hall.

"What the-," she began, her eyes wide. Dustin accidentally tackled her to the ground in his rush to chase Dart.

"What was that?" Max asked as they disentangled themselves.

"Dart! You let him escape!" Mike accused, his anger at her boiling over, but there were more important things right now, like getting that thing back.

"Why did you attack him?" Dustin shot back, just as angry.

"C'mon!"

"Don't hurt him! Don't you hurt him!" Dustin shouted after him, but Mike had long stopped listening.

Eleven could see more and more light ahead of her as the trees thinned out. She stepped out into the clearing, her feet no longer crunching on leaves but meeting the smooth, paved road. And there it was... Mike's school.

Her breath caught in her throat and her heart began to race at the mere sight of the place. She had been here twice; once to use the radio to find Will and the second time to find him in the bath, but that's not what she remembered most. Her thoughts were immediately drawn to the memory of Mike pressing his lips on hers in this very school. At the time, Eleven hadn't known what to call it, the way Mike's lips had made her feel tingly all over. After watching various people on the TV doing it she now knew that it was called a kiss and only people who really liked each other kissed. So, despite everything that had happened after that, Eleven would always associate this place with her first and only kiss with Mike.

The anticipation of potentially seeing Mike in real life made Eleven break into a run, spotting a familiar sight as she neared the school. There, along with the two others, was Mike's bike. She would never forget what it was like to ride on the back, clutching Mike tightly; the butterflies in her stomach took flight just thinking about it.

She slowed to a walk as she neared it, afraid it was just a dream. Reaching out, Eleven hesitantly put her left hand on the handle, her right hand found its way to the seat. Just knowing that she was touching something Mike had touched was making it hard to breath, but the fact that this bike being here meant Mike was close made it almost impossible.

Determined and unafraid of the consequences, Eleven strode into the front doors of the school.

"East's clear," Mike reported into the Supercomm, striding purposefully down the hall, his eyes constantly sweeping the floor. "No sign of Dart."

After their mad dash to find the creature, they all realized they were going to need to get organized, so they all split up with their Supercomms, which were almost always on their person, and searched the halls.

"Where'd you go, you little bastard?" he said to himself as he climbed a set of stairs.

He wasn't sure how but he just knew that this little thing was bad.

Eleven strode down a familiar hall, and she got a sense Mike was even closer. Following her instincts, she made a left turn down the hall. She was unsure where to go after that. She could sense Mike's presence in either direction. So, she turned right.

Mike stepped into the gym, another place that reminded him of El, and saw the swinging of the boy's locker room door.

Glancing around, he took a deep breath then approached.

It was dark... really dark actually. Mike could just make out the handle of a mop, so he picked it up as a makeshift weapon.

As he neared the end of the locker room, he heard rustling. He leaned back against the metal lockers lining the wall, taking a calming breath and gathering his courage. This was it. He spun around the corner and brought the handle of the broom down with an aggressive grunt, only to see a flash of red hair whip around at him.

"What the hell are you doing?!" Max yelled at him in surprise.

"What're you doing?! Why are you in here?!" Mike roared right back,

his heart still racing, now with the added heat of embarrassment.

"I'm looking for Dart," she explained defensively.

"This is the boys' room," Mike knew it was obvious but maybe it wasn't so obvious if she was in here. She seemed to be everywhere now and he couldn't escape her presence even in a boys' locker room.

"Yeah, so?"

"So, you should go home," Mike seethed, throwing the mop handle to the ground and stomping out of the locker room and away from her. But he could hear her following him and it only made him madder.

"Why do you hate me so much?" she asked to his back as she followed him across the gym floor. The same gym floor that El had laid in the pool and used her powers to find Will.

Pain shot through him and he hated that he couldn't go anywhere in this school and not be assaulted by memories of her. Now, this girl wouldn't leave him alone and seemed determined to try and take El's place. He could feel himself reaching a boiling point, but he tried to just walk away.

"I don't hate you. How can I hate you? I don't even know you," Mike told her defiantly, only glancing back briefly to see how closely she was following him, his Supercomm clutched in his hand, his knuckles turning white.

"Yeah, but you don't want me in your party," Max countered.

"Correct," Mike confirmed. So, she wasn't as stupid as he thought. Now why couldn't she just leave him alone? She already saw him make a fool of himself in the locker room what else did she want from him?

"Why not?"

This was the last straw.

"Because you're annoying!" Mike shouted in her face. Then somehow felt the need to justify himself to her, "Also, we don't need another

party member. I'm our paladin, Will's our cleric, Dustin's our bard, Lucas' is our ranger, and El's our mage!"

As soon as he said her name, Mike knew it was a mistake.

"El? Who's El?" Max asked in genuine confusion.

"Someone," Mike shot back quickly, but the last thing he wanted was to talk about El with a complete stranger, so even though it was the furthest thing from the truth, Mike corrected, "No one."

"Someone or no one?" Max challenged, annoyance coloring her tone. The searing pain in his chest at the continued mentioning of El was making it difficult for Mike to speak, but his multiple attempts to shut this conversation were ignored by the red head.

"She was in our party a long time ago. She moved away, okay," Mike growled back at her. He desperately wanted this to end, the pain, this conversation, all of it.

"She was a mage? What could she do like magic tricks or something?" Max asked, obviously intrigued. *Magic tricks*, Mike scoffed internally, *if she only knew the half of it*. Mike had already began to walk away but he heard her skateboard on the wood gym floor and then she was in front of him, blocking his path.

"Well, I could be your zoomer," she suggested.

"That's not a even a real thing," Mike argued, feeling his anger come back down to annoyance at her persistence.

"It could be," Max said. "See? Zoomer."

"Mindblowing," Mike said sarcastically.

"C'mon, you know you're impressed," Max circled him on her skateboard.

Mike had no idea he was still talking to this girl. Why wouldn't she just leave him alone? Who was the stalker now?

Eleven heard it. Mike's voice. In real life.

The sound of her heart pounding filled her ears making it next to impossible to discern his words, but she heard him. Eleven was also pretty sure her lungs had stopped working because breathing became an impossible task as she stood momentarily frozen in the hallway.

Eventually, Eleven was able to convince her legs to work and she approached the door hesitantly. This was it. She was going to see Mike after all this time. He would be so happy and she would be so happy and maybe he would kiss her again. As if in slow motion, Eleven felt like the few steps to the door were a thousand miles. But she reached it and tentatively peered through the glass window, holding her breath in anticipation.

There he was.

Eleven almost cried with relief. It was really Mike. He was facing away from her, but there was no mistaking the boy who had saved her almost a year ago. He was so tall. She knew he had grown, but it was hard to tell just how much because she usually saw him when he was sitting cross-legged in the fort. His dark hair was just as she remembered it though, but what she wanted to see were those eyes.

As if on cue, Mike turned just slightly so she caught sight of the side of his face. She knew handsome was the word she was supposed to use for boys but she couldn't help but think Mike was so pretty, maybe even prettier than she remembered, if that was possible.

But his dark eyes didn't land on her as she wished they would, instead they were on someone else.

For the first time, Eleven noticed Mike wasn't alone. She had been so entranced by seeing him that she had completely been deaf and blind to the fact that there was a girl with him, smiling at him. And Mike was smiling back.

An ugly feeling exploded inside of her. It was a mixture of hurt and sad and anger and-and- just all the bad.

Mike was supposed to smile at her and kiss her and take her to the

Snow Ball...but he thought she was gone. He had stopped waiting. She was too late.

The pain was excruciating. Eleven's heart felt like it was shattering, the shards slicing her open from the inside out. She was in so much pain. She needed relief. She needed to take it out on something...or someone.

Eleven didn't even really think about it. She used her powers and pulled the board out from under this girl, making her fall to the ground hard.

It didn't make her feel better.

"Jesus! Are you all right?" Mike asked the girl with concern, kneeling beside her. Eleven felt like she was going to be sick, but she couldn't look away. A part of her still wanted him to look up and see her and forget this stupid girl and smile at her and no one else. The TV called this feeling jealousy. She hated it. It was suffocating her.

"Yeah, I think so," the girl replied in a pained voice, but Eleven's attention was solely on Mike again, memorizing every detail of him to save when she was gone again. For good this time.

She watched as Mike took the girl's hand and helped her up. The ugly feeling only grew. Mike was only supposed to hold her hand like he did in Hopper's truck on that night so long ago.

She couldn't do this anymore.

Leaving him the first time had been the hardest thing she'd had to do at the time, but leaving him a second time was next to impossible. But, Mike deserved to be safe and happy and Eleven knew that the only way he could have that would be without her. She would give up her only chance at being anything more than halfway happy so that Mike could live his life all happy. So, she blinked back the tears that threatened to spill down her cheeks and walked away.

"What happened?" Mike asked, even though he didn't really like this girl he didn't want her to be hurt either. She had taken a pretty hard,

unexpected fall. One second she was skating around him, mocking him, the next second she was on the ground.

"I don't know. It was just like a magnet or something pulling on my board. I know that sounds crazy," she replied, shaking her head at how ridiculous that sounded.

Mike's breathing stopped all together. That didn't sound ridiculous. That sounded a lot like...

His eyes flashed to the glass door. He couldn't explain it, but he just felt her again.

Something was pulling him to the door, first at a walk, then at a sprint. He burst through the doors. And looked either way, seeing nothing but the empty hallways. The usual feeling of crushing disappointment filled him and he lowered his head, closing his eyes and trying to get ahold of himself. He was the one being ridiculous now. He couldn't do this anymore.

Max walked up beside him with his Supercomm, holding it out for him to take.

"Will said he found Dart at the bathroom near Solerno's," Max reported to him and he snatched the radio from her hands before taking off at a run with the red head close behind.

He was embarrassed and angry and in so, so much pain, but finding Dart may be the key to figuring out what was going on with Will. So, Mike did what he always did, he shoved those feelings as far back as they would go.

At a crossroads in the halls, Lucas met up with them and they rushed into the bathroom only to find Dustin.

"Where's Dart?" Mike asked breathlessly.

"I don't know. He's not here," Dustin replied a little too quickly.

"What?" Mike exclaimed, hurrying to check the stalls, only to find them empty.

"Will said he was near Solerno's?" Max clarified.

"Maybe Will has him," Dustin suggested and then Mike noticed for the first time that their friend wasn't with them.

"Where is Will?"

A/N: Sorry for the bit of a delay. Work has been kicking my butt this week and I wanted to spend a little extra time on this chapter because of how important it is for Eleven. It definitely was one of the more challenging episodes to write. Hope you all like it! Let me know what you think!

4. Chapter 4: Will the Wise

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CHAPTER 4: WILL THE WISE

"Where is Will?"

Nobody knew. Mike could feel the apprehension building inside him because he knew with everything that was going on with Dart and Will acting weird earlier that he might be having another episode.

In a hurry, they split up to look for the smallest member of their party; Dustin and Max took the school, Mike and Lucas focused on outside. It didn't take long for Mike to spot him though.

There in the middle of the field was Will, standing stock still, his face upturned towards the sky, and his eyes rolled back into his head, eyelids fluttering. Fear gripped Mike's chest as he and Lucas sprinted to their friend, calling out his name, but he gave no response or acknowledgement that they were there at all.

Not knowing what else to do, Mike grabbed his friend's shoulder and shook him, lightly at first and then a little more roughly, all the while shouting his name. Meanwhile, Lucas had noticed that Mrs. Byers' car had screeched to a halt in front of the school, and he had ran back towards the school to get help. Mike was solely focused on helping his friend, even if he had no idea how to do that.

Then, all of sudden, Mrs. Byers, Max, Dustin, and Lucas were all running towards them.

"Will!" Mike continued shouting, before turning to Mrs. Byers, "I just found him like this! I think he's having another episode!"

"Will! Will! Will! Sweetie, wake up! It's mom, Will," Ms. Byers pleaded with her son, but it was like he wasn't even there. Mike stepped back to give her some room. Mike had never seen anyone

have a seizure but this is what he imagined what someone having a seizure standing up would look like.

And then with a sharp inhale Will seemingly snapped out of it, his eyes flashing open.

They all kind of stood there in shock, unable to formulate a coherent sentence, and they didn't really have a chance anyway because Mrs. Byers hurried him away. They followed them through the school and back out the front doors where they stopped to watch them both drive away.

"Okay, that totally freaked me out. Did that not freak you guys out?" Max asked, looking at them for validation.

"Two episodes in two days," Lucas stated, almost in disbelief. All of them were thinking the same thing: what was happening to their friend? He hadn't been the same since he had gotten back from the Upside Down last year but this felt different.

"It's getting worse," Mike concluded.

"You think it's True Sight?" Lucas asked, and Mike's eyes snapped to him.

Despite the fact that they were all still reeling from what they had just witnessed, Mike couldn't believe he brought up their private conversation with Max there. She wasn't a member of the party. She didn't know that Will had been lost in the Upside Down last year. She didn't even know about the Upside Down, and that was for the best for everyone involved. Will didn't need his business made known to a stranger, Max didn't need to be put in unnecessary danger, and the party didn't need another member.

"What's True Sight?" Max asked, but Mike's stare never left Lucas. He shook his head just slightly at his friend to get him to shut up. Luckily, he got the hint because he replied shortly, looking away from the red head,

"It's nothing."

That night Mike went home, his thoughts full of what had happened

to Will and Dart but also something else too. Ever since Max had fallen off her skateboard in the gym, Mike's couldn't stop thinking about how strongly he had felt El's presence. He had been so sure that she was there with him again.

Trying and failing to put thoughts of El out of his mind, Mike ate dinner in relative silence, asking to be excused early after only a few bites of his meatloaf. He didn't know how to explain why, but he just felt... off. It was almost as though he had felt so close to El and then further than ever. He knew he was being stupid again.

Nevertheless, Mike went to sit in El's fort for his usual routine. Crossing his legs, Mike picked up the Supercomm and pulled up the antenna. Mike lifted his right wrist and checked his watch, running his fingers over the band. Memories of fastening it around El's narrow wrist last year floated to the surface of his mind; it gave him the push he needed to speak.

"It's Day 354...", Mike began, holding the talk button. Today, he felt cold and alone, nothing like the reassuring warmth he usually experienced that made him feel like she could actually hear him. He was just going through the motions at this point, but he just needed this. He knew no one was listening to him tonight, but he continued along anyway,

"I was in the gym today... it made me think of you and that night. I thought- I thought I felt you there. I know it's ridiculous, but weird things are happening again with Will and the Upside Down and I just know that if you were here you'd know what to do."

He released the button, but he didn't strain his ears to listen with bated breath for a response amongst the white noise. Mike could feel his throat closing up and tears prickling his eyes. He was sad and angry and he still couldn't force himself to just let her go and end this suffering. He just couldn't do it.

Pressing the Supercomm hard against his forehead, Mike cried, silent tears streaking down his cheeks. Eventually, he could no longer support himself so he laid down in the fort, crushing his eyelids shut and begging for sleep to take him so he wouldn't have to feel this pain anymore.

Eleven walked more slowly back to the cabin, not keen on returning to her prison quickly. She cut back through the woods the way she came, those same leaves crunching under her feet, but now she almost reveled in the sound as it gave her something to keep her grounded.

There were a lot of ways Eleven had imagined seeing Mike again would go but seeing him smiling at another pretty girl wasn't one of them. Her chest felt cold and empty as if her heart was devoid of life. She was numb to all pain now. If you couldn't feel then you couldn't hurt.

One thought just cycled through her mind as if on an endless loop:

Mike likes someone else now.

Maybe he even took her to the Snow Ball, as he called it. Maybe he danced with her. Maybe he had even kissed her.

But why had he kept calling her for 353 days then? He said he missed her...but maybe he only wanted her back as a friend now. Whatever the reason, it was over. She would leave Mike alone to live his life and be happy. But now that she didn't even have the hope of Mike, Eleven just knew that she would never be close to happy again. Not even half-way happy. How could she when her heart would always be with Mike?

As she neared the cabin, Eleven's eyes drifted upwards to see a dark silhouette standing on the porch smoking a cigarette. The one night he came home on time...

She paused looking up at him. She hoped he could see her glare in the darkness. She knew he was going to be mad and she was ready for this fight. She had nothing left to lose at this point, or so she thought.

As she walked past him and inside the little building, he put out his cigarette and she heard him follow her in, his heavy footfalls punctuating his anger. The door slam loudly behind her.

"Friends don't lie!" he used her words against her, it was just another reminder of Mike that she didn't need right now. "Isn't that your bullshit saying?"

Mike's saying wasn't bullshit.

The cold, numbness was thawing out quickly. She was starting to feel again and that wasn't good. All the pain and sadness and fear and anger were starting to rush into her heart all at once, so she attempted to retreat into her room.

"Hey! Hey!" He yelled after her, but she walked right into her room, only turning once inside because Hopper had caught the door and flung it back open. "Don't walk away from me!"

Adrenaline was beginning to course through her, stoking the flames of her fury. His tone insinuated that he held some power over her, but she was done with men telling her what to do, controlling her. So, Eleven dared him with her eyes to try and do something. She had already lost everything today, what else could he do? Did he even know what she was capable of? She could snap his neck with one jerk of her head, he may need a reminder of who was the one in control here.

She could tell her look must have taken him aback a little because he literally leaned back into the door frame as she removed her jacket calmly.

"Where did you go on your little field trip, huh?" Hopper asked accusatorily, "Where? Did you go see Mike?"

The name alone made it feel as though she were being ripped to shreds. So much for being numb. She really debated whether she was going to answer him or not, pacing slightly in the small space of her room. She took several calming breaths against the rage building inside of her, but that left her with the pain. After a long pause, she gave him a sideways glance and said softly, "He didn't see me."

For once, she just wanted him to understand. Couldn't he see how being away from Mike had tore her apart from the inside? And now, Hopper making her wait all this time had lost her Mike.

"Yeah, well, that mother and her daughter did, and they called the cops," he shot back with that condescending tone he always used, making her feel stupid and small. Then, Hopper stepped further into her room, violating her space by getting right into her face. "Now, did anyone else see you? Anyone at all? C'mon! I need you to think!"

"Nobody saw me!" she snarled back, getting right back into his face. In response, Hopper stood straight and walked away from her, a frustrated hand on his forehead, before he came to lean against her dresser on the other side of the room.

"You put us in danger. You realize that, right?" he said in the calmest voice he could probably muster. This only stoked the fire in her chest. What right did he have to blame anything on her? Nothing happened. The bad men weren't looking for her. And she wouldn't have had to leave without him if he had just kept his promises and let her see Mike every once in a while. But no. And now Mike had moved on.

"You promised I'd go," she began angrily, trying to get control of her temper but it was no use. Her voice broke and it made her even more mad and she only got louder and louder as she continued, "and I never leave! Nothing ever happens!"

"Yeah, nothing happens, and you stay SAFE!" Hopped yelled, punctuating his words with a slam of his palm on her dresser. It startled her a little and she couldn't stop the slight flinch. This entire time she had been with Hopper she had never been afraid that he would hurt her physically, but this was the maddest she had ever seen him.

The man leaned his elbow on her dresser, holding his forehead, eyes crushed shut. What did he have to be upset about? It was her life and she was beginning to feel like he was just keeping her like some kind of pet, manipulating her so she wouldn't leave.

"YOU LIE!" she screamed at him.

"I don't lie! I protect, and I feed, and I teach!" he straightened up from the dresser to growl this at her. "And all I ask of you is that you follow three simple rules. Three rules, and you know what? YOU

CAN'T EVEN DO THAT!"

She wanted to cry but she did everything in her power not to show how upset she was, to do so would be weakness. The longer their fight went on the smaller and smaller she felt.

He stomped out the room and she kicked the dresser he had just walked away from as if he could feel it. It was the only release she had because she really didn't want to hurt him with her powers. It would be so easy but hurting people never made her feel better. She knew it, but her anger was making her forget that.

"You're grounded! You know what that means?" he yelled from the other room. "It means no Eggo's...", she heard him open the fridge, then the sound of boxes hitting the floor before he slammed it shut as he continued, "and no TV for a week."

He made to move the TV, but she was too fast for him and she used her powers to hold it firmly in place. It was her only way to see Mike. Yes, she had told herself that she would let him live his life without her, but she had to keep seeing him with her mind visits. There was no way Hopper was taking that from her too.

Hopper stood up and turned to her, in a slightly breathless voice he demanded, "All right, knock it off. Let go."

He seemed to have forgotten she wasn't just a regular kid. Eleven could feel the familiar trickle of blood on her lip but she just shook her head, refusing to release the TV.

Hopper did the same thing again, he leaned over and strained to move the TV, but she held strong and he turned and threatened, "Okay, two weeks."

He tried again.

"Let GO!"

But she just shook her head.

"A month!"

"No." she told him calmly.

"Well, congratulations. You just graduated from no TV for a month to no TV at all," he growled as he ripped the cord out of the wall. The picture flicked off instantly.

"NO!" Eleven shouted in disbelief and ran towards it, her heart sinking in dread, and begging for it not be broken, "No! No."

Her hands fumbled with the antenna, but she knew it was no use. He had destroyed her only connection to Mike.

"You have got to understand that there are consequences to your actions," he said tiredly from behind her. She spun around and screamed at him,

"You are like Papa!"

"Really? I'm like that psychotic son of a bitch?" Hopper said, running a hand through his thinning hair before threatening her coldly, "Well, all right. You want to go back to the lab? One phone call and I can make that happen."

He wouldn't do that, would he?

"I hate you!" she could feel herself losing the battle against tears, but Hopper didn't stop there.

"Yeah, well I'm not too crazy about you either, you know why? Because you're a brat. You know what that word means? How about that be your word for the day, huh? Brat. Why don't we look it up? B-R-A-T. Brat," and then he picked up a dictionary off the shelf and tossed it at her.

She stopped its forward momentum and just held it there for a second. She was done. If he wanted to control her and treat her like a dog then she would fight back like one, so she used her powers to throw the dictionary back at him. He was able to deflect it away, but she could see the shock in his eyes, and maybe a slight glint of fear.

"HEY! What the hell is wrong with you?" he began to approach her aggressively. So, she pushed the couch into his legs to slow him

down. He wasn't going to put hands on her. She wouldn't allow bad men to do that to her ever again.

Eleven stomped across the living room, throwing down a shelf on her way and then walking straight into her room as he bellowed behind her, "HEY! HEY! HEY!"

But she didn't care, she stomped straight into her room and slammed the door shut with her powers. Almost immediately she could hear him ram it and struggle with the handle, trying to gain entry.

"OPEN THIS DOOR! OPEN THE DAMN DOOR! YOU WANT TO GO OUT IN THE WORLD? YOU BETTER GROW UP! GROW THE HELL UP!"

Eleven fell raggedly against the far wall and slid down to the floor, unable to keep herself upright any longer. Rage and excruciating pain blinded her to everything and all she wanted was to be away from him and this place.

With a guttural scream, she shattered every window in the cabin. When she was done, all she was felt was hollow and alone, sobbing uncontrollably in the furthest corner of the room.

Day 355.

"Michael! Come up and eat breakfast or you'll be late for school!"

Mike awoke to the sound of his mom yelling for him. Rubbing his eyes, he sat up slightly disoriented, and a loud crash sounded next to him. He looked at the source of the sound and saw that his Supercomm had fallen. He must have gone to sleep with it resting on him and his sitting up had just dislodged it. The memories from last night hit him and he realized that he had fallen asleep down here again. If he was going to get through another day he'd have to shove these thoughts to their place in the back of his mind. With a sigh, Mike pushed himself up from the floor and made his way up to his room to change his clothes quickly before heading to the kitchen for breakfast.

He typically didn't interact much with his family anymore but Holly was sitting there humming as she ate and it brought the smallest of smiles to his face to see her so happy and carefree. Holly was one of the few people he still got along with, but she was a toddler so that didn't mean much.

"You like those grapes, Holly?" Mike asked his little sister and she nodded emphatically, shoving some more in her mouth.

But then his ears caught Nancy's conversation with mom and he couldn't help but listen.

"Hey, Mom. I was thinking about staying the night at Stacey's tonight. We were gonna have a girl's night. Romantic comedies, do our nails, gossip," Nancy said off-handedly as she got up to get her toast, but Mike saw right through that bullshit.

"Sure, that sounds like fun," his mom replied though, and Mike couldn't believe it. She really bought that load of crap. But whatever. Who cares?

Mike finished getting ready for school and rushed out of the house, remembering he and Lucas had agreed to go looking for Dart before first period. As usual, as he pedaled by Lucas' house, his friend came riding out to meet him and they biked there together. Though today, Dustin didn't join them, but they just figured he'd be along a little later, probably slept in, same with Will.

They put their bikes up on the rack as Max approached them. The dumpster seemed like the most logical place to start looking for Dart since Dustin had said he originally found Dart in his trash outside his house. So, Lucas stole some straws from the cafeteria and they cut them to various lengths to see who it would be to go in there looking for Dart.

Max held them even in her hand and Mike picked first, normal length. Max picked next, looked to be about medium length, but Mike suspected she knew that since she was holding them but he didn't care. That left...

"Stop being a baby and do it all ready!" Mike shouted up at Lucas as

he paused on the edge of the dumpster. Lucas had to be reminded that this was the rule of law before committing to doing it.

"This is so disgusting, is this really necessary?" Max sneered with distaste.

Then, their curly haired friend came jogging around the corner, a look of utter bewilderment on his face.

"What the hell's going on?" Dustin asked, squinting at them against the bright morning sunlight.

"What do you think? We're looking for Dart," Mike replied snidely, leaning against the wooden broom handle he'd found to poke through the garbage.

Lucas threw two trash bags high into the air and over the side of the dumpster, causing Dustin to jump back in surprise.

"Geez!"

Lucas appeared over the edge of the dumpster and lifted himself up, hopping down to the pavement.

"Well, well, well," Lucas pointed out sarcastically, "Look who finally decided to show up after I drew the short straw. Real convenient."

"You stink," Max stated the obvious, crinkling her nose, and walking around him to stand a little further away, which just happened to be closer to Dustin.

"Hi, Max," Dustin greeted her with a smile. Mike would've laughed if he wasn't still annoyed that these guys were letting Max in their party.

"...hi?" she replied slowly.

"Where's Will? Dustin asked, turning his attention back to him and Lucas.

"He'll be here," Mike said with confidence he didn't feel.

"Are you just gonna stand there?" Lucas asked, throwing one of the wooden sticks at Dustin, "Or are you gonna help?"

They had no luck finding Dart and eventually the bell rang and they all rushed off to Mr. Clarke's class. Mike lost himself in his favorite teacher's lecture, but it did nothing to keep his mind off of El as he had hoped it would.

"All living things, from complex mammals to single celled organisms, instinctively respond to danger," Mr. Clarke told them. "Expose a bacterium to a toxic chemical and it will flee or deploy some other defense mechanism."

Mike glanced sideways at the empty seat next to him, hoping Will was okay. After the episode on Halloween he had come to school, so what was going on today? Maybe his mom had taken him to the doctor to get checked out again?

Mike turned his attention back to Mr. Clarke who continued, "We're very much the same. When we encounter danger, our hearts start pounding, our palms start to sweat. These are the signs of physical and emotional state we call fear."

Mike knew all about fear. He felt it every time the idea of never seeing El again crossed his mind. As if on cue, his heart began to race at the mere thought of it, and Mike decided he hated this lesson.

Day 327

Eleven awoke to the sound of loud banging, so she rolled out of bed and opened the door just enough to see what Hopper was doing. When he turned to look at her she slammed the door closed again. She wasn't ready to talk to him yet, not after all of the hurtful things he had said to her last night.

But she heard his footsteps nearing her door, so she stood there and listened as he spoke.

"Hey, kid, listen, uhm, about last night, I-uh," Hopper began softly, but then his voice hardened, "I want this place cleaned up by the time

I get back and maybe I'll consider fixing the TV, you hear me?"

Anger coursed through her again at his refusal to apologize. So, she stepped away from the door and flopped back on her bed, folding her arms across her chest in defiance.

Beginning to get worried about his friend the further in the day Will didn't show, Mike decided during recess he was going to call the Byers' house to check in on him. But something didn't feel right. Dart shows up, Will has an episode the day before, and then he doesn't show for class? It all seemed connected somehow.

Mike listened as the phone rang and rang until the Byers' voicemail message began to play. Hanging the phone up in frustration, Mike turned and jogged back to where his friends were congregated, Lucas calling to him before he even made it back,

"Anything?"

"We need to talk! AV Room! Right now!" Mike demanded, running past them and up the stairs to head inside the school. The boys and Max got up to follow, but Mike glanced backwards at the red head, shooting over at her, "Party members only."

"C'mon, Mike," Dustin implored, seeing Max's slightly hurt look, but Mike didn't care. It was for her own good not to know anyway.

"No, this is non-negotiable," he said firmly and the other two seemed to begrudgingly accept it.

"Sorry, Max," Dustin apologized first, followed by Lucas, "Sorry."

They hastily made their way to the AV Room, locking the door behind them, not like it stopped Max last time, but still.

"Will didn't want me to tell anyone, but on Halloween night he saw some sort of shadow in the sky," Mike reported to them after hopping up on the table, the other two sitting in the chairs in front of him.

"A shadow?" Lucas asked, unsure. "What kind of shadow?"

"I don't know, but it scared him. And if Will really does have True sight, I mean really see into the Upside Down maybe he saw that shadow again yesterday," Mike explained his theory. It seemed logical, but it only made him worry more for his friend.

"So, that's why he was frozen like that," Dustin posed thoughtfully.

"Maybe," Mike agreed.

"I mean, can it hurt him? If this shadow thing isn't our world," Lucas asked, always the logical one.

"I'm not sure," Mike admitted, but the member of the party with the most D&D knowledge was..., "Dustin?"

"Well, if you're in another plane, you can interact with the material plane so theoretically no, the shadow can't hurt him," Dustin explained, staring down as if lost in thought.

"Yeah, if that's even what's happening. This isn't D&D... this is real life," Mike said solemnly.

"So, what do we do?" Lucas asked.

"We acquire more knowledge. I'll go to Will's after school, see what's going on. You guys stay here and find Dart," Mike suggested, feeling like the leader of the party again.

"Dart? What's he got to do with this?" Dustin asked, a little defensively.

"Will heard him in the Upside Down. I don't know how yet, but he's got to be connected to all this. He's gotta be. And if we find Dart, maybe we can solve this thing, maybe we can help Will," Mike posited, looking from Dustin to Lucas and back.

There was still a part of him that felt like El would have all the answers and that if Will really did have True Sight then maybe he could find her. But right now, they needed to focus on helping their friend.

As much as she was trying to let Mike go, Eleven just couldn't let her mind visits go. She needed to know he was okay, but it was more than that. If she was completely honest with herself, she would never be able to let him go.

So, Eleven spent some time trying to fix the TV herself, but the cord was destroyed.

What if Mike had called last night and she wasn't able to hear him? The thought ate through her. So, much so that she was willing to swallow her pride and actually do as Hopper said and clean up the cabin to get the TV back.

As she swept she saw a piece of glass stuck in a rather large hole in the floorboards. She shoved the chair out of the way and saw the door in the floor. Eleven opened it up and stared down into it, noticing the various boxes. Rushing to find a flashlight, Eleven made her way back over and laid on the floor, sticking her head down into the space.

Eleven swept the light over the boxes, looking at the labels: Dad, New York, Vietnam. Luckily, she could read somewhat now, but some of the words she still didn't understand.

Then she saw a box labeled 'Hawkins Lab.' Those were words she recognized. Her curiosity got the better of her, so she pulled it out and began to read. There wasn't a rule against that yet.

Eleven felt like she had gone through hundreds of pieces of paper, throwing them on the floor when she was done with them. She came across a blue file that was slightly thicker than the others, it had black handwriting on it.

"Ives...Terry," Eleven read aloud, opening the folder.

There were several newspaper clippings and pictures inside, fastened and paper clipped in various ways. Her eyes found one in particular that read: 'Indiana Woman sues D.O.E Claims child was stolen.' And yet another that said, 'Daughter Jane taken when she was a baby, Ives claims.'

"Jane," Eleven said to herself, the name feeling both foreign on her lips and strangely familiar.

She came across a black and white photo and she swore she stopped breathing.

"Papa," she whispered, because no matter how old this photo was, no matter how young Papa looked, she would never mistake those cold eyes.

All of the pieces were beginning to fit together...Papa with Terry Ives...Daughter Jane...stolen.

Now, her breaths came in short gasps as she tried to process the amount of information her brain was taking in, but she knew what this all meant.

Terry Ives was her Mama.

Hopper had said she was gone though. Eleven had to find out for herself though.

The TV was shot, it wouldn't help her right now, so Eleven scanned the room with her eyes, searching for anything that she could use to make the right sound. Her eyes fell on a radio. That would have to do.

Eleven fiddled with the dials on the radio and found the white noise she needed. She brought her blindfold up to her face, keeping the picture in her lap as she did so. When she was ready, Eleven held the picture in her hands, focusing as hard as she could on finding Mama, and taking several calming breaths to steady her nerves. It was taking a little more of her powers without the TV but she was stronger now. She brought the picture to her chest and focused until she was there.

In the distance, Eleven spotted her, in a rocking chair facing away from her and mumbling to herself. She approached slowly, her shoes slapping against the water's surface.

"Rainbow...450...Three to the right, four to the left," the woman continued to ramble off nonsensically as Eleven neared and came to a stop facing her.

Then all of a sudden the woman noticed her, looking right in her eyes, she said, "Jane."

Eleven could feel her heart racing in the real world but she kept her mind completely on the woman. Eleven could feel it. This was her...

"Mama," Eleven replied softly, hesitantly placing her hand over her Mama's cold one. And then, like any time she touched someone in the mind visit, Mama disappeared, dissipating like smoke. Eleven futilely grasping the air, calling out to her in agony, "Mama! MAMA! MAMA!"

She didn't even bothering removing her blindfold at first, just sobbing into the fabric as was becoming her new norm. Her heart felt like it was being stomped on over and over again. She had lived her whole life thinking she had no one, only to realize now she had a Mama, who was alive. Not only had Hopper kept her from Mike and her friends but also her Mama...

Her Mama wasn't gone. Hopper lied. Again. Why?

Eleven couldn't even form coherent thoughts as she finally pulled the blindfold off her head, allowing the tears to streak down her face. Her body shook with the power of her sobs. She couldn't figure out if she had just lost something or gained something, maybe a little bit of both. Either way this revelation was excruciating. Eleven didn't even know who she was anymore. Eleven...El...Weirdo...Kid...Jane...

After school Mike biked over to the Byers' house, anxious to see how Will was doing after yesterday and not coming to school today. As he neared, Mike dropped his bike to the ground and rushed up the porch to the front door.

"Hello? Will? Mrs. Byers?" he called through the wooden door, banging his fists on it loudly. Eventually, Mrs. Byers' answered looking like she hadn't slept at all in days.

"Hey, Mike," she greeted with a tired smile.

"Is Will here?" Mike immediately asked, skipping pleasantries. He

knew it was rude but he was worried about Will.

"Now is not really a good time," Mrs. Byers told him regretfully, but Mike wouldn't be deterred. He could tell something was wrong and he was going to find out what it was and help his friend by any means necessary.

"Is he okay?" he asked impatiently. Mrs. Byers' glanced back into the house for a second before stepping more fully onto the porch and closing the door behind her.

"You know, he's not feeling well, he's laying down, so I'll tell him you stopped by, okay?" Mrs. Byers slipped an arm around his shoulders and began guiding him across the porch towards the stairs, but he spun around and decided being blunt was the best way to go.

She had been there last year. She was a strong lady. She could take it. So, Mike asked flat out,

"It's about the shadow monster, isn't it?"

A/N: Thank you guys so much for the awesome reviews! I had no idea that anyone would like a season 2 novelization since it's not a whole lot of Mileven scenes, especially in the upcoming chapters. These will be significantly shorter but I hope I can keep them interesting for you all!

5. Chapter 5: Dig Dug

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CHAPTER 5: DIG DUG

"It's about the shadow monster, isn't it?"

The look of fear and disbelief that creased Mrs. Byers' brow at his words told Mike that he was right. She didn't even have to say it, so instead she just let him in, Mike called his mom to let her know he'd be staying at Will's tonight, and the three of them ate dinner in relative silence. There was a somber air to the household that hadn't been there since Will was lost in the Upside Down last year. It was like Will was here, but not really.

After dinner, Mike and Will went to his room, it was absolutely freezing in the house and Will had explained that the shadow monster wanted it cold, so Mrs. Byers had turned off the heat. The early November frost in Indiana made him shiver even though he was inside and still had his hoodie on. Yet, as Mike glanced over at his friend he could see Will sweating profusely, his skin pallid looking.

Eventually, despite Will's strange demeanor, Mike was able to get him to explain what was going on with the colorings taped to all of the walls.

"It's like I feel what the shadow monster is feeling, see what he's seeing," Will faced away from Mike, but he would hear how haunted his voice sounded. Mike grazed his fingers lightly across the colored pages that seemed to be covering every available surface of the house, following its path along the wall until he was even with Will.

"Like in the Upside Down?" he asked, trying to clarify what Will was referring to as to get some frame of reference to begin to figure this thing out. If they could figure it out then maybe Will could hone his True Sight to use it to his advantage.

Mike stopped his tracing and turned to gaze over at his friend where he sat bolt upright on his bed, staring off with a faraway look in his eyes. El would have that same look last year whenever they neared the answer that Will was in the Upside Down or the topic of the lab came up. It was a look that told him she had seen and experienced terrible things, unspeakable things, and she was forced to relive them in her mind over and over.

Mike had become accustomed to the feeling of his heart constricting painfully in his chest at the mere thought of her. Now, he had to push it aside, push her aside, just for the time being so he could help his friend. El had sacrificed herself so that Will and all of them could live, so Mike would honor her sacrifice by protecting his friend the best he could.

"Some of him is there, but some of him is here too," Will replied, still not looking over at him.

"Here? Like in this house?" Mike tried. He still wasn't understanding what Will was trying to tell him.

"In this house... in me...", Will continued to stare straight ahead, but Mike could see the tears welling up in his eyes and heard his voice become strained as he struggled to speak. "It's like he's reaching into Hawkins more and more and the more he spreads the more connected to him I feel."

As he listened, Mike sat next to him, trying to offer whatever support he could.

"The more you see these now memories," Mike inferred, looking down at his hands for a moment. His heart hurt for his friend and whatever this thing was that he was going through, but he didn't know what he could do to help. At least not yet.

"At first, I just felt it, in the back of my head," Will began to explain, reaching up to the back of his neck briefly. "I didn't even really know it was there. It's like when you have a dream and you can't remember it unless you think really hard. It was like that. But now it's like, now I remember, I remember all the time."

Out of the corner of his eye Mike could see the tears slipping down Will's cheeks, and he knew he needed to tell his friend to see the positive in this hellish situation. So, Mike supposed, "Maybe...maybe that's good."

"Good?" Will asked, confused and a little incredulous, finally glancing over at Mike as if he had said the most ridiculous thing he had ever heard. So, Mike elaborated,

"Just think about it, Will. You're like a spy now. A super spy, spying on the shadow monster. If you know what he's seeing and feeling, maybe that's how we can stop him. Maybe all of this..." Mike said, glancing around the room at the hundreds of pieces of paper to illustrate his point, "is happening for a reason."

Mike knew he was being selfish. He hated seeing Will in so much pain, he really did, but the mere idea that Will may be able to have some kind of power to see into the Upside Down gave Mike hope; hope that if Will could learn to use this newfound ability, then he could search for El. He would never wish pain or suffering on Will but if he had this power then it might be useful.

"You really think so?" Will asked him hopefully.

"Yeah, I really do," Mike said with confidence, giving Will an encouraging smile. Will's eyes averted and Mike followed his line of sight to look at a picture Will had colored, presumably of the shadow monster.

"What if he figures out we're spying on him? What if he spies back?" Will's eyes were wide with fear as he asked this, and Mike turned his attention back to his face quickly, telling him with certainty in his voice,

"He won't."

"How do you know?" Will's words wavered, and he could see his friend shaking in terror of this monster. And again, Mike wished more than anything that El was here. She would know what to do and how to defeat the shadow monster. But she wasn't, so Mike had to do whatever he could for his friend.

Mike put his hand over Will's shaking one to ease some of his anxiety and told him reassuringly, "We won't let him."

After that Will seemed to calm down a little. Mike suggested they go to sleep early so Will could rest up and maybe feel better in the morning. Mrs. Byers found one of Jonathan's old sleeping bags- Will wasn't much of a camper so he didn't have one- and Mike laid it on the floor close enough to Will's bed to be there for his friend but far enough away that he wouldn't get stepped on if his friend stood up.

It was getting colder and colder in the small house as it got later and later. Mike pulled his hood up over his head for some extra warmth, but it didn't help much. But there was something other than just the cold keeping him up too.

Mike rolled over and checked to see if Will was sleeping. It was hard to tell from his spot on the floor, but he thought the steady rise and fall of his friend's chest was a pretty good indicator. Mike reached over to his back pack, but as he began slowly unzipping it he hesitated.

He had been getting ready to pull out his Supercomm and make his usual call to El, but he was having second thoughts. It was one thing to speak to her alone in the relative emotional safety of his basement, in her fort. He didn't think Will would make fun of him or judge him or anything, but it just felt wrong somehow. But it also felt wrong not to talk to her at all. If she really was trapped somewhere and was using her powers to hear him then she would be able to hear him with or without the Supercomm, just like she did with Will. He just wouldn't be able to hear her back. But it wasn't like he had heard her on any of the other 354 days.

Mike sighed. He wasn't ready to let this go. Not yet. He still needed her, even if it was just the illusion of her. So, as quietly as he could Mike opened his back pack and pulled out the Supercomm, he slipped out of the sleeping bag, and padded out of the room. Luckily, Mrs. Byers had gone to bed as well so the path to the bathroom was clear. Once there, he closed the door carefully behind him and pulled up the antenna, turning the volume low. It was always on channel eleven these days, so all that was left was to speak.

"It's Day 355," Mike whispered, but then he paused. This was his chance to stop all of this, to just let her go, and end this stupid need to call a ghost every night. But as he stared at himself in the bathroom mirror, he couldn't help but imagine her, how she must have looked when she stood presumably in this very spot on their last night together, just before they had made the "bath" in the school gym.

She had been so brave and so fierce, finding Will, killing those all those bad people, and then ultimately saving them from the Demogorgon. She was the most powerful person he knew, and not just because she literally had powers. She had been through hell and back, and Mike was ashamed to admit he had been the cause of some of her pain, but she had endured it all, the bad men, the monster, being manipulated by her so-called Papa. She was a survivor.

Mike could feel his heart swell, warmth spreading from his chest, at this revelation. El was strong, so he was more certain than ever that she was alive. Not only that, but she had to be the key to solving whatever was going on with Will and Dart. With renewed purpose, Mike lifted the Supercomm, staring determinedly at his reflection in the mirror.

"El? I hope you can hear me," Mike spoke earnestly into the silence. "I just want you to know that I know you're out there and I'll never give up on finding you. I promise."

Day 356.

The sudden sound of someone gasping for air startled Mike awake. He sat up quickly from his place on the floor and looked up at his friend with concern.

After his call to El last night, Mike had been able to sleep much better, despite the cold, his heart felt much warmer. His dreams had been full of her, his memories of her, the future with her. He was hopeful for the first time in a long time and ready to help Will, following whatever path that took them. Mike was confident that would lead him back to El.

"Will, what's wrong?" Mike asked, sleep making his voice scratchy. Will was sitting bolt upright breathing hard and glistening with sweat again. Will just stared back at him, eyes wide with fear at whatever he had just seen.

"I just saw Hopper and he's in danger," Will managed as he slowly came became aware of his surroundings.

"In your now memories?" Mike's voice was serious, the dire circumstances, waking him up better than any alarm clock. Will merely nodded in response, so Mike concluded, "You need to tell your mom."

So, they both made their way into the living room where they spotted Mrs. Byers sitting on the floor, staring at something they couldn't see in front of her. Mike hovered behind as Will approached his mom, giving them some space.

"Mom...Mom...Mom," he heard Will call out to her before shaking her shoulder when he didn't respond.

"Yeah?" she finally noticed he was there.

"I saw him," Will told her.

"You saw who, Baby?" she asked in confusion at Will's vagueness. So, Will elaborated,

"Hopper... I think he's in trouble... I think he is going to die."

Day 328.

When Hopper hadn't returned last night, it had only strengthened Eleven's resolve to leave again. But this time she wasn't going to see Mike.

No. She needed to find her Mama. She didn't even use the radio to visit Mike with her mind. As much as she wanted to and as much as it killed her inside not to see him, Eleven curled up in bed and tried to just let him go. But she knew she would never be able to really let him go.

He was safe and he would one day forget all about her and be happy. She could live in this world of excruciating pain if Mike was happy. So, Eleven decided she would focus all of her energy on finding out who she really was and where she belonged in this world, if it wasn't with Papa or Mike or Hopper, then maybe it was with Mama.

She got up early, got dressed, packed a bag, and set out until she found the biggest road she could find. From there, she waved her hands at passing cars, trying to get them to stop so they would give her a ride. She'd never make it to Mama's on foot and the idea of being out in the woods again wasn't appealing. Eventually, a big truck stopped for her and a nice man offered her a ride when she told him she was trying to get back to her Mama.

In her mind, Eleven was able to perfectly picture the house where her Mama lived as well as the address on the mailbox, so that's where she told him to go. He asked her some questions but she didn't really answer them; he didn't need to know anything about her and she didn't want to lie. Thankfully, the ride wasn't too long and eventually he slowed to a stop.

"All right, I think this is it. 5-1-5 Larrabee, right?" the nice truck driver confirmed, glancing past her at the driveway leading up to the house, before turning his attention to her.

Eleven looked over at him, affirmed and corrected, "Yes. Five fifteen."

"Five fifteen, sure," he gave her a friendly smile, but she couldn't muster one to return the nice gesture. Instead, she turned and opened the heavy door, preparing to exit the truck, but she glanced over her shoulder briefly.

"Thank you," she told him quietly, but before she could hop down to the ground he called out to her.

"Hey," he said, and she turned to look at him, "you apologize to your Mama, must be scared half to death. How long has it been?"

Again, Eleven didn't want to lie to the nice man, but the truth was far too complicated.

"Long time," she replied shortly, hopping out of the tall truck and slamming the heavy door closed behind her. She stood at the end of the driveway and watched him drive away before turning towards the house, giving the mailbox a sideways glance as she passed it.

The path to the door was a long gravel road, but she had made it this far. So, she followed it to a house only a little bigger than the cabin, but much smaller than Mike's.

Taking several calming breaths, Eleven found the courage to knock twice, bracing herself for whatever reaction she was going to get from a mother she hadn't seen since she was born.

But there was no response, so Eleven hit her palm flat on the door three times and a voice yelled from inside.

"Go away! I'm not interested!"

Determined, Eleven then began to hit the door repeatedly and she would keep doing it until someone came to the door. She came too far to be turned away now. Her persistence was rewarded when the door opened a crack, a dark-haired woman's face peering through the gap angrily.

A chain holding the door closed partially blocked Eleven's view, but she knew this wasn't her Mama, but there was something familiar in her features, especially her dark curly hair.

"Look, I don't want your thin mints, all right kid," she said angrily.

Eleven didn't understand.

"Thin mints?"

"Or your religious mumbo-jumbo. Whatever you're selling I'm not buying, 'kay?" the woman told her with finality and promptly shut the door in her face.

Eleven considered her options at that point. She could just leave. She had made it through life this far without a mother, so she would be fine, but always wonder. Or... she could force her way in and get the answers she came for. Eleven chose the latter.

Planting her feet and tucking her chin, Eleven focused on the chain she had just seen, and used her powers to lift the rounded part up and out of the track holding it in place before swinging the door open slowly.

"I want to see Mama," she said simply. She knew she had scared the woman, but this was important. This was her life, after all.

The woman stared open-mouthed at her from down the hall. After a long moment, she nodded her head slowly as Eleven wiped the blood from her nose on her sleeve. Seemingly unable to speak, the woman led her down the hall and gave her a sad look. Eleven stepped up next to her and looked into the room, hearing a TV playing Family Feud in the background. She liked that show too.

Inside was a blonde woman in a rocking chair, unkempt, her face slack, but speaking quietly to herself. Eleven's inhaled sharply. This was her Mama.

"Rainbow... three to the right, four to the left...," Mama continued as if she hadn't noticed her come into the room at all.

"Mama?" Eleven called out to her quietly, approaching slowly so as not to startle her.

"...breathe...sunflower...rainbow...three to the right, four to the left...," her mother continued speaking as if she hadn't heard her either.

"Mama?" she tried again. "Can you hear me?"

"...450...breath...sunflower...rainbow...," she kept muttering.

Eleven watched, so many feelings swirling around her insides. Happiness, sadness, surprise, confusion, wonder.

"Mama, it's me, Jane," Eleven told her, kneeling to be at eye level with her, but the woman didn't meet her eyes. "I'm here now," she told her, putting a hand on hers where it gripped the arm rest of the rocking chair.

That's when Mama finally looked at her. For a moment, Eleven was

sure she stopped breathing, her heart pounding in anticipation. And then her Mama spoke.

"Breath...sunflower...rainbow...450...breath...sunflower...", she continued, even as she looked straight at Eleven. Not at Eleven... through her, as if she was invisible.

"What's wrong with Mama?" she turned to ask the dark-haired woman, who looked distraught, bringing a hand to her mouth as tears pooled in her eyes.

Since Will had been using his drawings to channel his connection with the Upside Down, it only made sense to sit him down at the table with paper and some crayons again. And it worked. Almost immediately Will began to scribble roughly on the paper in the same colors as his other drawings: purples, blues, and blacks. He pressed the crayon so hard into the table that Mike thought for sure the crayon would break as he colored furiously, as if possessed. Eventually, he stopped coloring, dropped the crayon, and leaned back from the table.

"Is this where you saw him? Is this where you saw Hopper?" Mrs. Byers asked Will. Mike stood off to the side, glancing curiously over Will's shoulder.

"I think so, yeah," Will responded timidly.

Seeing the colored page, Mike and Mrs. Byers set off down the hall, eyes scouring to find the piece that matched the one in her hands. They split up at the end of the hall and Mike spotted what he thought was it on the living room wall.

"Here!" he called out to her and she ran over with the paper, holding it over the other page.

"Oh, okay, so Hopper is here," Mrs. Byers said breathlessly.

"Yeah, now we just need to find out where here is, right?" Mike confirmed, hoping she had some more insights into how to figure this out than he did.

"Right," she replied, unsure.

"Did he say anything? I mean, before he left?" Mike asked, anxious and totally focused on the task at hand.

"Something about vines?" she replied with just as much uncertainty as he felt as she looked up at him.

The sound of a car pulling up the drive drew both of their attentions, so they rushed to the front window. Mike watched as Bob stepped out of his car, and he glanced sideways at Mrs. Byers to see how she planned to play this one.

She quickly went outside to meet him before he came into the house and saw the whole scene while Mike hung back and checked on Will.

Mike was extremely surprised when Mrs. Byers invited Bob into the house in the state it was in, but he said nothing. Mrs. Byers asked Bob for his help to figure out this puzzle and they all stood in the middle of the living room, surrounded by colored paper everywhere, waiting to hear his reaction.

"Huh...Hm," Bob just made noises at first before he managed, "You drew all these yourself?" Will nodded slightly at him and Bob asked, "Why exactly?"

Mrs. Byers jumped in immediately.

"I told you the rules, no questions," Mrs. Byers reprimanded him and then began to make her way over to the living room, "We just need you to help us figure out-," she noticed he wasn't following and called over to him, "Bob! Bob! Over here."

Bob handed Mike the stuff he had brought for Will before following Mrs. Byers into the next room. Mike set it down on a side table and followed closely behind.

"Where-where this is." Mrs. Byers finished, using a red crayon she had picked up to mark Will's drawing with an 'X.'

"That's the objective, find the 'X'," Mike instructed, playing along with what Mrs. Byers had apparently told Bob that this was some kind of

puzzle game.

"Yeah, what's at the 'X'? Pirate treasure?" Bob joked, but Mike could see he was more than a little confused and he wondered if Bob was going to call the cops to have them all sent to the nuthouse.

"Bob, no questions," Mrs. Byers reminded him again. Bob may have reached his limit though.

"Okay... let me just talk to you for a second, hang on guys," Bob said after considering it for a moment. He slipped an arm around Mrs. Byers and led her out of the room, leaving Mike and Will.

They sat at the kitchen table, letting Bob figure things out, or Mrs. Byer to decide it wasn't worth it to explain it to him. But then Mike could hear Bob's excited voice in the halls.

"-they act like roads because, you see, they don't go over water," he heard Bob say as he neared the kitchen. "And that's the giveaway. That's the giveaway! Ha! Don't you get it? It's not a puzzle, it's a map. It's a map of Hawkins. Right Will?"

Mike couldn't believe it. Bob had figured it out.

"I just need a little help understanding, Sweetie," the woman said as they sat at the kitchen table. She had introduced herself as Aunt Becky, her Mama's sister, the one who had been taking care of her. She was nice. She had made Eleven lunch but the sandwich remained untouched on the table, she just didn't have an appetite. Eleven heard her speak but continued to stare over at her Mama, trying to understand what happened to make her this way.

"Can you tell me where you came from?" Aunt Becky asked gently, but Eleven kept her eyes glued to Mama. "Where you've been all this time?"

Eleven had never found it useful to tell people things about her life. It always seemed to put them in danger. The nice man at the restaurant, her friends, Mike... She didn't have a chance to dwell, her painful thoughts weren't interrupted once more.

"A policeman and a woman came looking for you last year, did they find you?"

No, she wanted to say, Mike found her and took her out of the rain, and kissed her and asked her to the Snow Ball and made her feel safe and happy for the only time in her life. But she couldn't.

So, Eleven ignored her questions and asked one of her own, "She won't get better, will she?"

"They don't think so... no...but she's not in any pain... she's just stuck, living like in a dream, a long dream," Aunt Becky replied, obviously even after all this time it still hurt her to say these words. Eleven finally glanced over at her. She knew dreams could be good, but dreams could also be bad. Very bad.

"A good dream?" she asked quietly, hopeful.

"I hope so," Aunt Becky replied, her eyes somber but nice. Eleven averted her eyes, the overwhelming feeling of loss crashing over her as tears began to form in her eyes. It was so unfair. She had lived her whole life thinking she didn't have a Mama, then found out she had one, only to then discover she was stuck in a dream, completely unaware of her existence.

"Is it the same dream?"

"We don't know. Sometimes she says different words, but usually those," Aunt Becky told her softly. Eleven could feel her eyes on her but she continued to stare at Mama, wishing she could use her powers to heal her. But that wasn't how it worked.

The sadness became too much and Eleven could feel herself beginning to cry at the injustice of it all. She could see Aunt Becky reach her hand across the table as she tried to reassure her, but Eleven's hands remained clasped protectively to each other around her middle.

"She always believed you were out there. She always believed you would come home one day," she said, tears in her own eyes as well. But it wasn't her tears that got Eleven's attention, it was that word.

"Home?"

"Yeah, home," Aunt Becky repeated, biting back tears and Eleven knew she meant it.

Maybe this was where she was supposed to be. It was definitely better than being with Hopper who lied and kept her prisoner or Papa who also kept her prisoner but also used her and manipulated her to hurt people and animals. But here wasn't with Mike. That meant he'd be safe.

Eleven reached forward and took her outstretched hand on the table. Even though she had been rude at first Eleven liked her. If she couldn't be with Mike, this would be the next best thing. And who knows, maybe one day Mama would recognize her.

Eventually, Eleven ate the lunch Aunt Becky had made. She still didn't feel she was ready to tell her everything, but she was relieved to know that she had family. After she finished eating, Aunt Becky wanted to show her something, so he led her down the hall to another room.

Aunt Becky stepped to the side in the doorway to allow Eleven to enter the room first. Eleven glanced timidly at her before making her way into the dimly lit space. It was a baby's room with a crib. A crib meant for her.

Her heart felt like it was being wrenched in two, gazing around at all of the nice things that had been meant for her. She approached the crib slowly, wrapping her hand on the smooth wood of the railing. Pain seared through her as she reached down and picked up a stuffed bear. This was supposed to be her life. The life that was stolen from her by Papa. A life with nice things and a family who loved her.

"Pretty," she whispered more to herself.

Everything about this hurt. To see the home, she could have had... the life she could have led. She could have been happy. But it would have been a life where she had never met Mike...

That made her pause. What would life have been like if she had never

met the nice boy with the dark eyes who called her pretty and made her feel the butterflies in her stomach? Eleven didn't know if she could imagine a life like that.

"I can get you a real bed and you can stay here with me if you want. How's that sound?" Aunt Becky suggested from behind her. Eleven hadn't heard her come into the room so distracted was she by her thoughts.

Eleven considered that offer for a moment. She didn't really have anywhere else to go and Aunt Becky was nice and the only family she had, so Eleven nodded.

"I want to help you but to really do that I'm gonna need you to talk to me, okay? Doesn't have to be now, doesn't have to be today, but when you're ready, okay?" Aunt Becky told her, and as much as Eleven was hesitant to do that could try. She wished she never had to think about the lab again. Couldn't she just start over? She had nothing before this, only Mike and he was gone now too, happier without her.

"Okay," Eleven agreed after a moment.

As she replied, she saw the lights flickering over Aunt Becky's shoulder, in an all-too-familiar way. Eleven made her way over to the light in the hall, stopping in front of it. Then, the light further down the hall blinked, so Eleven followed that one.

"Oh yeah, that. That happens sometimes. Old house, bad wiring. If you ask my crazy aunt Shirley it's... haunted," Aunt Becky explained dismissively, but Eleven was already down the hall.

Eleven followed the flickering back down the hall, down the stairs and into the kitchen.

"Sweetie, really it's just the wiring," Aunt Becky tried to assure her again, but Eleven knew better.

"No," as she said this the light flickered near Mama, so she shot a glance over at Aunt Becky before walking over there and kneeling beside the rocking chair.

"It's Mama," Eleven said, reaching her hand up to the bloody nose on her mother and wiping the blood away with her finger.

"...sunflower...450...three to the right, four to the left..." Mama rambled on, staring blankly at the TV.

"I-I don't understand," Aunt Becky said from the doorway.

"She knows I'm here," Eleven replied as all of a sudden, the TV changed stations seemingly on its own, but she knew better than that too. Eleven stood up and stared at the screen as the channel changed again, slowly and then faster until it stopped on the white noise.

"She wants to talk."

"All right, I'm 3.6 inches, what do you got?" Bob called from the kitchen.

"I'm not sure...Mrs. Byers?" Mike called back, holding the tape measure to the spot over Lover's Lake as Mrs. Byers wound around the house looking for Tippecanoe.

Once Bob had figured out that all of these drawings were a map of Hawkins, then came the task of working out where each place was. Bob went around pointing out location he recognized and they labelled them, so that Bob could use an actual map and some measurements to deduce where the 'X' was.

"Hold on," she called back and then, "21 feet 4 inches."

"What about Tippecanoe to Danford Creek?" Bob asked from his place at the table.

"D-Danford? Where's Danford?" Mrs. Byers shouted in frustration. She obviously was losing all patience for this and was worried about Hopper.

"Dining room!" Will called back, and his mom made her way over there, as Mike took her place at Tippecanoe.

"16 feet, 10 inches," she replied, but Bob wasn't done.

"What about Danford to Jordan?"

"C'mon. This has got to be enough," she groaned irritably, walking towards the kitchen table. Mike felt her tugging on the end of the tape measure, so he released it and followed her and Will to stand next to the table where Bob was, leaning over the edge to see how he was calculating the distances.

"It's not, it's really not," he insisted.

"Can't you figure it out?"

"Well, it's hard. The ratio isn't exactly one to one. If you're twisting my arm and you're twisting my arm I would say that the 'X' is maybe...a half mile southeast of Danford," Bob concluded, marking the map. Mike was pretty impressed he had figured all of that out without knowing any of the context.

"Thank you! Thank you!" Mrs. Byers kissed Bob on the cheek, grabbed the map, and ran to the door. Mike glanced at Will before they rushed after her, leaving a stunned Bob.

"What? Are we really going?"

It was going to be too complicated to explain to Aunt Becky how exactly her powers worked, but she was able to tell her that she could communicate with Mama in her mind if she had several things.

"Like this?" Aunt Becky asked holding up the dish towel she had just cut in half.

"Yes," Eleven approved.

Then, they moved to the living room. Eleven's heart was pounding in anticipation; she hoped this mind visit would be more productive than the last one. But the realization that her Mama had powers too was exciting and gave her some hope.

Eleven lowered herself onto her knees in front of Mama's chair, already focusing her mind on the task at hand.

"It's okay if I sit here right?" Aunt Becky asked awkwardly.

"Yes," Eleven replied shortly, wrapping the makeshift blindfold around her head and plunging herself into darkness.

"And I won't mess it up or anything?" she continued and Eleven could tell she was nervous, but she needed to concentrate.

"No."

Aunt Becky continued speaking anyway, "If you talk to Terry will you tell her that I love her very much and that I'm sorry that I didn't believe her-."

"Stop talking," Eleven cut her off. On one hand, she felt bad for the woman. She obviously cared deeply for her sister but on the other, she hadn't trusted her when she still had her mind.

"Sorry," Aunt Becky apologized, chastised.

"Breathe...sunflower...rainbow...three to the right, four to the left....450," Mama mumbled, and even as Eleven delved into her mind and darkness enveloped her, she continued, repeating those words over and over.

"Mama? Mama? It's me, Jane," Eleven spoke softly, slowly walking towards her mother in the darkness of her mind. "I'm here now. I'm home."

"No," she said snapping her eyes to Eleven and grabbing her hand so suddenly it scared her a little. The action seemed to have changed her mind visit and she wasn't sure how at first.

"Mama!" she called out to her, no longer seeing the woman in the rocking chair in front of her.

Eleven was still in the place inside her mind, but she was not in control.

A pregnant woman with long blonde hair stumbled past her. It was her Mama. She was grunting in pain and bleeding as she collapsed to the ground.

"Mama! Mama!" Eleven shouted, running towards her and coming to kneel at her side.

"Ah! My baby!"

"Mama! What do I do?!" Eleven's hands touched her Mama's hands and her face and her stomach, fear gripping her and making her blind to the fact that this wasn't really happening.

"Breathe, just breathe all right? They're on their way, okay?" Eleven turned to the now familiar voice, startled, only to see a younger version of Aunt Becky.

Then her mind visit shifted into memories... her Mama's memories. It was disorienting to go from her Mama's point of view to outside of her but Eleven refused to back out of the mind visit.

"Stay with us, darling, stay with us." She was being wheeled down a hallway, bright lights above and masked faces.

A baby's cry. Papa's face. Black then sunflowers.

"Hey there," Aunt Becky again. The fuzziness of the memories was making Eleven a little nauseous as was their rapid succession, but she stayed.

"Jane, where's Jane?" Mama asked but Aunt Becky began to cry, grabbing her hand.

"I'm sorry, so sorry."

"No, I saw her," Mama insisted.

"No, no she wasn't breathing," Aunt Becky told her with a shake of her head, her brown curls bouncing.

"She was crying. I heard it. He was there," Mama corrected her, the memories flooding back to her as well.

"Who was there?"

"He took her," Mama said angrily, trying to get of the hospital bed,

but Aunt Becky stopped her made to stop her. Then in flurry of chaos and activity, nurses came in and out a needle in Mama's arm.

Black again.

Mama was in her house wearing pretty makeup.

"Three to the right, four to the left," she said to herself, kneeling on the floor and Eleven could see it was a safe she was opening. With a gun inside...

She drove to the lab and tried to walk in with a group of ladies.

"Ma'am, can I see your badge?" A guard tried to stop her. She pulled out the gun and pointed it at him.

"Stay back! Stay back!" she ordered, the man went for his gun and she fired.

It was too much. Eleven didn't want to see anymore. She tried to get out...but now she couldn't. She wasn't in control anymore.

Alarms were going off now. Mama was going door to door in the lab, past people in white coats until she came to a door with a rainbow on the frame. Mama opened the door and there were two children inside: a light-skinned blonde child and a slightly older dark-skinned child with black hair.

"Jane! Jane!" Mama called out in relief to the blonde child... her.

But the bad men grabbed her and pulled her away as she screamed in agony, "No! She's my child!"

Black.

"NO!" Mama screamed. Chaos again. Mama was being strapped to a table as she struggled violently to break free of the bad men as they put something in her mouth and metal things on her temples.

Then there was Papa... younger... with dark hair but the same cold, uncaring look.

"450," Papa ordered and a bald man turned a dial as Mama screamed through the thing in her mouth, convulsing as the shocks streaked through her.

And then it stopped. Mama was left panting on the table. But then all of the memories started replaying rapidly on an endless loop. Mama's pressured voice narrating,

"Breathe...sunflower...three to the right, four to the left...rainbow...450."

It made Eleven feel like she was going to be sick again and finally she was thrown her out of her own mind visit. She yanked the blindfold off and fell back in anguish. Gulping in as much oxygen as she could, Eleven couldn't seem to get enough air. Her mind was reeling, unable to process what she had just seen. Her breathing became even more labored as she stared up at the shell of a human her Mama had become at the hands of Papa and the bad men.

She felt her Aunt Becky fell to her knees behind her and wrapped her arms around her awkwardly, unsure of how to comfort her. Eleven didn't think there was anything in the world that would make her feel better about what she had just witnessed.

"There's nothing. There's nothing here," Mike was starting to feel like they had messed up somewhere. They were in the middle of nowhere. Why would Hopper possibly be out here this far?

It felt as if they had been driving for hours when really it had only been one. They were all getting a little anxious, even Bob who had no idea what they were looking for.

"Are we close?" Mrs. Byers asked, anxiously glancing over at Bob.

"We're in the vicinity," Bob responded unfazed.

"What's that mean in the vicinity?" The fear of what kind of danger Hopper might be in was putting all on the edge and the tension in the car was reaching a boiling point.

"It means we're close! I mean I don't know it's not precise," Bob said

defensively, gesturing to the map in his hands.

"We did all that work," Mrs. Byers said in frustration.

"I told you the scale ratio was not exactly one to one. We needed to take more measure-."

At that moment, Mike saw Will lurch forward out of the corner of his eye and Will blurted, "Turn right!"

"What?"

"I saw him," Will said.

"Where?" Mrs. Byers leaned forward and strained her eyes to see out into the darkness but Will clarified,

"Not here. In my now memories."

"In your what?" Bob was really confused now.

"Turn right!" he yelled again and this time, Mrs. Byers swung the car around off road. They ran through a bale of hay, eliciting a scream from everyone in the car that continued as they bounded over the uneven ground. Coming to a sudden stop, mere centimeters from Hopper's truck.

"Are you okay?" Mrs. Byers asked them breathlessly, all of them panting at the adrenaline rush of almost crashing.

"Super spy," Mike said, glancing over at Will, impressed.

"What's Jim doing here? Joyce?" Bob asked, totally clueless but Mrs. Byers ignored him.

"Boys, I need you to stay here," she ordered, opening the car door, but Will called out to her,

"No, Mom! Mom! Mom! It's not safe!"

"That's why I need you to stay here. Stay here!" Mrs. Byers demanded emphatically, getting out the car and slamming the door shut behind

her. Bob followed suit.

But they had to get out of the car when they saw both Mrs. Byers and Bob go down into the hole.

"Do you see anything? I mean, in your now memories?" Mike asked, staring apprehensively down the hole they had just saw Mrs. Byers and Bob disappear into, but Will just shook his head.

Then, lights and the sound of cars drew their attention behind them. A bunch of those Hawkins Power and Light vans pulled up. Mike would never forget those.

The men spilled out of the vans and paid them no mind, going straight for the hole and securing the area.

All of a sudden, Will crumpled to the ground and instantly Mike dropped down beside him as he convulsed.

"Will? Will? Are you okay? Will, what's wrong?" Mike shook him, fear gripping him as he watched his friend writhe in agony.

Then he broke out into a scream and started seizing, Mike stumbled backwards staring down at his friend in helpless shock.

A/N: It makes me so happy that you guys are still enjoying this. Side note- A few people have asked me about the fact that Mike called her on day 354 (in the story) when El says later (in the show) 353 days. Well, I took this as the last time she heard him was 353 days because they both went off on their separate journeys after that. The show doesn't explicitly show Mike making any other calls but I refuse to believe he just quit calling her cold turkey with no major reason behind it, so that's why I decided to add those. End side note Anyway, I'm just as anxious as you guys are to get to Season 3. And I'm still back and forth about whether I'll wait and do a novelization or write my own. Or maybe I'll do both! I definitely have plot ideas, so just let me know what you think! Love it or hate it I appreciate any and all reviews. They're pure writing fuel!

6. Chapter 6: The Spy

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CHAPTER 6: THE SPY

Mike was in a stupor. He had no idea how he arrived at the lab, but he must have gotten in the car with Bob because Mrs. Byers had ridden in the van with Will. Even as they wheeled one of his best friends down the halls, all Mike could do was follow in stunned silence, watching his friend writhe in agony until one of the nurses stuck a needle in his arm to sedate him.

After that Will collapsed against the gurney, unconscious. Controlled chaos ensued from there. In a flurry of activity nurses and other staff transferred Will to an actual bed in one of the numerous rooms. Things began to settle down after that and it was just a waiting game to see when Will would wake up.

It was a good thing it was a Sunday and his parents didn't ask too many questions when Mike told them he was going to be staying at the Byers' again. His parents were the most clueless people in the universe. Mike was pretty sure that the beeping of the monitors would have given him away, but his mom just told him to 'have fun.' And they wondered why he didn't tell them anything.

Mike hadn't had a chance to take a shower or change his clothes in a couple days. There had just been too much going on, and now he was sitting next to Will's bed, terrified, wondering if his friend was going to be okay, he couldn't possibly leave his side.

The doctors in this stupid lab didn't seem to have any idea what was going on with Will. But then again, there was only one person who could help... and she wasn't here.

So, when Bob and Mrs. Byers stepped out of the room to talk to the doctors, Mike scooted his chair closer to the bed and clasped Will's hands with both of his. He didn't have his Supercomm, but it didn't

matter anymore. It was a long shot anyway, but he had to at least try.

Mike crushed his eyelids closed and leaned his head forward on their joined hands, almost as if he were about to pray, something he never did until now. He focused every ounce of his brain power on El, as if he had powers too and could somehow find her with his mind. He pictured her face with her soft features and her chocolate brown eyes, her shaved head, and even the slight dimple in her cheek when she smiled.

Taking a sharp inhale against the stabbing pain in his chest, Mike whispered into quiet room, only the sound of his voice and the heartrate monitor disrupting the silence.

"El... it's Mike It's Day 356...", he began, his voice breaking a little, but he forced himself not to cry. He swallowed hard against the lump in his throat and continued, "Please, El, I know you're out there..."

Mike paused as he struggled to find the words. He had done this for 355 other days. Why couldn't he do it now?

"Please come back...If not for me then for Will. He needs you. I need you. Please come home," Mike begged. He lost the battle against his tears, they streaked down his cheeks and his shoulders shook with muffled sobs.

Day 357.

Mike fell asleep in the chair next to Will's bed, a thick wool blanket draped over him. It wasn't the most comfortable position in the world, but it would have to do because Mike wasn't going to leave his friend.

"Is there a doctor?! We need a doctor!"

Mike had actually been able to fall asleep but was abruptly awoken by Bob shouting for a doctor. His pulse picked up in fear but then he sat up and saw that Will had just woken up and didn't appear to be in immediate distress. His view was partially obscured by Mrs. Byers rushing to Will's side, but he could tell that Will was still pale and

looked weak.

"Hey Sweetie, how're you feeling? You okay?" she asked, her eyes full of concern and tired relief. Mike just watched from his spot on the chair, letting them have their moment.

"They're on their way," Bob came back in the room and reported to Mrs. Byers before turning to Will. "Hey."

Will's eyes slid over to Bob and there was no recognition there, much to Mike's confusion.

"Who is that?" Will asked his mom, who looked just as taken aback as Mike felt. Bob had been dating his mom for most of the year, so why wouldn't he all of a sudden not recognize him?

"What?"

"It's me, big guy. It's Bob," Bob said with a slight smile as he reached out to touch Will's hand but Will yanked his away as if it had been burned, still looking at Bob as if he had never seen him before.

"Are you a...doctor?" Will asked slowly, clearly sensing that he was supposed to know who this person was but he just had no idea.

"No, it's just me, just Bob," the older man said, glancing to Mrs. Byers for a moment.

Something definitely wasn't right with Will. His eyes were completely flat, devoid of all emotion, nothing like his usual warm, friendly ones that made everyone feel like he care about them.

Shortly after that Dr. Owens appeared, as he introduced himself last night. He seemed like a nice guy but Mike had learned that trusting anyone from the lab was a bad idea. After all, these were the scum bags that had hurt El. The familiar fire burned in his chest whenever he thought about what they had done to her, particularly her so-called Papa. Good thing that bastard was dead or Mike would kill him. At the moment, it seemed they had no other option but to hear what this new doctor had to say, for now.

There were a lot of people in the room now, several doctors, along

with Dr. Owens, Hopper, Mrs. Byers, Bob, and himself, all surrounding Will's bed.

"Do you know your name?" Dr. Owens asked Will, shining a pen light in one eye and then the other. Mike watched as he clicked the light off and stuck it in his pocket, a serious look on his face.

"Will," his friend replied, his face stoic. They had put some sensors on his forehead, so his hair was pushed back and more of his pale skin was visible.

"Your full name?" the doctor clarified.

"William Byers," Will replied flatly.

"Do you- Do you know who I am?" Dr. Owens continued with his questions.

"A...doctor," Will had to think about that one, closing his eyes and searching his mind.

Mike watched all of this from his spot across the room, unable to shake this sense that this wasn't his friend. There was something off about him, more than just his memory being impaired.

"Have we met before?"

"I don't remember," Will answered honestly.

"You don't remember me?" Dr. Owens continued, "Okay... how about this guy here? You know who that is?"

The doctor pointed at Mike and he could feel himself getting his hopes up. He and Will had been friends since kindergarten, so of course he should remember him. But what if he didn't?

Will slowly turned his head in the direction the doctor had pointed and eventually his eyes fell on Mike, who waved and gave Will a small encouraging smile, but Will's face remained a mask.

It was taking a little while for Will to respond, so the doctor put a hand on Will's shoulder and told him, "It's all right, take your time."

Mike just stood there, unmoving, waiting to hear his response with bated breath.

"That's my friend...", Will began, and then, "Mike."

Mike breathed a sigh of relief and smiled to himself, giving Mrs. Byers a sideways glance. He felt bad for Bob but happy that Will was able to remember him.

"What about me, kid, you remember me?" Hopper chimed in, a smile on his face, but as Will turned to look at him and shake his head slowly, the smile faltered. "They told me you helped save me last night, you remember that?"

Again, Will shook his head.

"Do you remember anything about last night? About what happened?" Dr. Owens asked. Even from where Mike was standing across the room he got the sense that Will was becoming annoyed with all of the questions, something Will would never do.

"I remember they hurt me," Will replied, his voice even. Mike's heart ached to be reminded of the agony that Will had been going through. Mrs. Byers had a stronger reaction to the memory and had to look away from her son for a moment.

"You mean the doctors," Dr. Owens clarified, but Will gave a curt shake of his head.

"No. The soldiers," he corrected, his eyes staring unblinkingly at the doctor.

"The soldiers hurt you?"

"They shouldn't have done that. It upset him." It was the first time since waking up that Will had shown any emotion, but it wasn't an emotion they had been expecting. Will practically growled this at Dr. Owens, his eyes cold and angry.

Mike's mind was racing. It upset him? Was the shadow monster taking over now?

"You say it upset him," the doctor pulled out a photo of Will's drawing and asked, "Is that him?"

Will looked down at the photograph before raising his eyes to the doctor and giving him a slight nod.

"Okay, I want to try something. It's gonna seem a little odd at first, but I really think it's gonna help us understand what's going on here. Is that okay?" Dr. Owens said the last part to Will, placing a comforting hand on his shoulder once more.

Mike shifted uncomfortably and glanced around the room briefly. He still didn't like the idea of trusting these doctors. They worked here in the lab and El had called the people who were here bad men. These might not be the same bad men but were they any better? That was yet to be determined.

"Okay," Will agreed.

They got somewhat comfortable while they waited, Hopper jumped up to sit on one of the counters, Bob and Mrs. Byers stayed in their spot, so Mike decided to hop up on the counter next to the Chief.

Another man in white lab coat, presumably another doctor, wheeled in a cart with a glass tank on it. Mike couldn't really make out what was exactly in there but he swore it looked like a giant slug.

"Now, Will, I just want you to let us know if you feel anything, okay?" Dr. Owens told him, before nodding to the new doctor. The doctor, turned on a blow torch and held it above the slug thing and then moved it downwards, closer to the creature. The thing started to make a noise of pain that Mike thought sounded strangely familiar. It sent a shiver down his spine, but his gaze remained fixed on his friend.

"Do you feel anything?" Dr. Owens asked, turning back to study Will's reaction.

Mike wasn't sure how all this was going to figure out what was going on with Will but he stayed silent, watching.

"It-little sting," Will reported with some difficulty, his brow creasing

slightly.

"Stings where?"

Will lifted his hand to his heart, seemingly struggling to breathe as he said in a strained voice, "My chest."

"Okay," Dr. Owens said, giving the doctor a subtle nod. The doctor lowered the blow torch closer to the creature and it screamed out in pain, or at least that's the only way Mike could think to describe that awful sound. "How about now?"

"It burns! It burns!" Will shouted, sitting up in the bed and holding himself as straight as possible. His monitors were beeping rapidly as his heart began to race.

"Where?" Dr. Owens asked calmly.

"Everywhere!" Will yelled in response, his eyes going wide with pain.

"Now that's enough!" Mrs. Byers demanded, but the doctor didn't stop. The slug thing writhed in pain and shattered the glass of its tank in the process.

Seeing at how much pain Will was in and that they weren't stopping, Hopper jumped down and yelled, "Knock it off! You heard her, that's enough! You're done!"

"Okay," Dr. Owens said, and Hopper stepped back a little as Will settled back into the bed. The monitors were slowly returning to normal rhythm.

"It's okay, Sweetie. It's okay," Mrs. Byers comforted him, but they needed to speak to the doctor out of the room. Hopper went with her, leaving Will with Bob and Mike for a little while.

Mike tried to strike up conversation with Will a few times, but it was clear that his friend didn't want to talk. So, Mike chose to just sit next to his bed and be there for his friend.

It was hours and hours they sat there. Hopper stepped out for a little while, leaving the rest of them. Mrs. Byers was beginning to get

antsy.

"What the hell is taking so long?" she hissed, not really at any of them, just at the situation itself.

"Hey, doctors take forever always. Just try and relax, try and be patient," Bob told her soothingly, placing a hand on her knee briefly, but she continued to fidget anxiously in her seat.

Mrs. Byers slipped the blanket off her shoulders and stood suddenly, unable to formulate a coherent sentence she just said, "You know- I just-."

Bob followed her quickly and Mike could hear raised voices in the hallway. Mike stayed in the room with Will and eventually he began to notice that the beeping of the heart rate monitor was picking up speed again, while Will's face remained slack. But it was his eyes. Mike could see so much anger and hate in those cold eyes.

So, Mike leaned forward with concern and shook his friend's shoulder slightly and called his name until he got his attention, "Will? Will? What's wrong?" At his touch, Will startled and turned to Mike, breathing hard, even as Mike asked, "Are you hurting again?"

"I- I saw something," Will managed, trying to sit up. Mike couldn't help but notice there was just something in Will's demeanor that just wasn't right. This was nothing like his friend, but he chalked it up to the pain and the medications.

"In your now memories?" Mike asked.

"The shadow monster... I think I know how to stop him," Will said.

So, when Mrs. Byers and Bob got back Mike convinced Will to tell them what he told him, that there was a specific place that they could burn and it would stop him. In turn, Mrs. Byers told Dr. Owens, who in turn told the other doctors and they fanned out all of the pictures they had taken of Will's drawings of Hawkins. Mrs. Byers was a little miffed that they had gone into her house and took pictures without her permission, but hopefully it would come in handy.

All the doctors crowded around Will and Mike as Will stared down at the pictures they had taken of his drawings, all laid out on a long table.

"Sam, this is ludicrous," one doctor said as Will seemingly searched the map for what he was looking for. Mike just threw a glare over at the doctor who had spoken.

"Just give him a moment, okay," Dr. Owens shooed him off with a wave of his hand, but the dark-haired doctor was impatient.

"We don't have time-."

But he never got to finish because Hopper cut him off abruptly, "Hey Jackass, why don't you do us all a favor and shut up, okay?"

All the while Will was completely focused on the task at hand, standing up to look at the pictures further down the table. Mike remained in his chair just watching his friend but Dr. Owens followed him, holding his arm out to get the other doctors out of Will's way.

"That's it," Will stated flatly, pointing to one of the pictures.

"That's it- that's what, Will?" Dr. Owens asked with nervous excitement. Hopper and Mrs. Byers leaned over to see the picture as well.

"I don't know. I just know that he doesn't want me to see there. I think it's important," Will told them, his hand not leaving the picture. Hopper and Dr. Owens shared a glance.

After that there was a flurry of activity. The doctors and Hopper leaving, while Will, Mrs. Byers, Bob, and Mike were ushered back into Will's room. From the snippets of conversation Mike could hear from the doctors it seemed like they were going to send the soldiers to that spot and start another "burn" as they called it.

Again, Mike sat at Will's bedside, wordlessly providing whatever support he could to his friend.

"I-I'm sorry," Will said suddenly and Mike glanced up at him in confusion. Mrs. Byers beat him to a response though,

"What? What do you mean, Sweetie?"

Mike could see how upset Will was as he turned to his mother, pale and on the verge of tears.

"He made me do it," Will's strained voice answered, and Mike could feel his heart plummet to his stomach. His mind was putting together all of the pieces and he slowly realized with dread that the shadow monster had done just what Will had been afraid of it doing.

"Who? Who made you do what?" Mrs. Byers questioned him in a panicky voice.

"I told you they upset him," Will croaked but his mom still didn't understand. "They shouldn't have done that. They shouldn't have upset him."

Then Mike's heart stopped all together because he knew.

He looked up at Will, eyes wide, as he breathed, "The spy." Mike immediately shot up from his chair shouting again, "The spy!"

He sprinted out of the room, hoping he could stop them before it was too late. As he approached the soldiers, Mike ran right at them trying to get to the door where he knew Hopper and Dr. Owens were, but the soldiers made an impenetrable wall and held him back.

He couldn't explain it but it felt as though there was something, or maybe someone, there with him. If he didn't know any better he'd say El was there giving him the courage to try and save these men, even if they were the bad men. She wouldn't want them to die at the hands of the shadow monster either, so Mike did everything in his power to get to them, to save them.

"Whoa, whoa, whoa!" one of the soldiers yelled at him, clearly surprised at his sudden outburst.

"I need to get through! It's a trap! I need to warn them! IT'S A TRAP!" Mike kept yelling, even as Bob pulled him back, bear hugging him from behind so he couldn't escape.

"Mike!" Bob called his name, trying to get him to calm down, but it

didn't matter anymore. There was no saving them. They were all dead by now.

A/N: Worlds shortest chapter! Sorry! But you all know it's gonna get really good here soon! I'm dying to get there myself. Thank you all so much for your support of my fics. You guys make me so happy.

7. Chapter 7: The Lost Sister

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CHAPTER 7: THE LOST SISTER

"And it just kept repeating?" Aunt Becky asked her slowly, her brow creased in confusion.

After Eleven had calmed down enough to process what she had just witnessed in her mind visit with Mama, Aunt Becky invited her back to the kitchen table to talk and made her another sandwich.

"Repeat?" Eleven wasn't familiar with that word.

"Like a circle, just showing you the same image over and over?" Aunt Becky clarified.

"She kept showing the girl in the room," Eleven told her, using the same words Aunt Becky used.

"The rainbow room?" she asked and Eleven nodded. "What did the girl look like?"

Eleven imagined what the girl looked like from Mama's memory. The image of a dark-skinned girl appeared, playing with some kind of unfamiliar looking toy, her shiny black hair in two neat braids.

"Different," was the only word Eleven could think of to describe her.

"Different than you?"

"I think this is why Mama wanted to talk," Eleven determined, her eyes on Aunt Becky to gauge what she thought of this.

"To show you the girl?" Aunt Becky seemed unsure but Eleven was sure enough for the both of them. She nodded to her aunt and glanced over to her look at Mama briefly, as if she was the answer to all of Eleven's questions about her life. But for now, Aunt Becky

would have to do, so Eleven turned her attention back to her and said,

"I think she wants me to find her."

Aunt Becky didn't ask too many questions after that, but she did stand up from the table with a thoughtful look. Eleven followed her, leaving her uneaten sandwich on the table, and Aunt Becky led her to a room with a desk and filing cabinet. They had a lot of those in the lab, but these were different, not as stark.

Aunt Becky began removing files, throwing relevant ones on the floor as she spoke, "When Terry was looking for you she kept these files on other missing kids, kids she thought were like you."

That made Eleven's heart hurt, to know that she had a Mama who loved her and tried so hard to find her and get her back. But also the revelation that there were possibly more girls like her who Papa had used and manipulated made the hurt turn to anger. But Eleven pushed it aside to focus on the task at hand, dropping to the floor to look at the files.

"Maybe that girl is in here...somewhere...here," Aunt Becky continued, pulling out a manila colored file folder and kneeling next to Eleven on the floor. She passed Eleven the folder and she took it. Eleven began to flip through the newspaper clippings, not bothering to read the headlines.

"Does anyone look familiar?" Aunt Becky asked and eventually Eleven came to someone that did indeed look familiar. The dark-skinned girl with the braided hair stared up at her with the headline, 'Vanished! Indian Girl Missing in London.'" Eleven hesitantly pulled the newspaper clipping out to see it more clearly.

"Is that her?" Aunt Becky asked and Eleven looked up at her, nodding somberly.

Aunt Becky sat with her again as she turned the TV to the white noise and covered her eyes with the blindfold. She strained her mind to find the girl, but all she found was darkness. After several fruitless minutes, Eleven slid the blindfold down in annoyance. She hadn't

been able to not find someone before, maybe the picture was too old? But Mama's picture had been old too.

"Did you find her?" Aunt Becky asked and Eleven turned to look at her, nose dripping with blood,

"No."

She looked back down at the picture trying to force herself to remember anything, anything at all about the girl to aid her in her search, but she came up empty. Aunt Becky tried to make her feel better but it didn't really work. Aunt Becky made dinner- meatloaf- and as good as it was, all it did was make Eleven sadder because it reminded her of Mike and the time he snuck his mom's meatloaf down to her fort. Eleven shove that memory down with all of the other happy Mike memories.

Aunt Becky set up a temporary bed for her in the room that had been made for her as a baby all those years ago. Eleven thought the sadness would last but she was strangely okay with it because now she had something else to focus her attention on: finding this girl.

Using her powers again, without the TV or a blindfold, she focused on the picture, first picturing the rainbow room, seeing her there, but then she was in her mind visit, a dark figure in the distance next to a fire. Eleven could hear her heart pounding in her ears as she approached the person slowly, the only sounds were her shoes slapping against the water on the ground and the crackling of the person's fire.

"Hello?" she called out, breaking the stillness, but as usual with her powers, the person didn't hear her. So, Eleven continued to walk slowly towards them and eventually she was close enough to see that it was a woman, wearing all black, with purple hair, her face just began to turn when, in her excitement, she pulled herself out of the mind visit.

Hopping out of bed, Eleven strode quickly out of the room looking for her aunt to tell her the news, "Becky! Becky! I found her!" Then, she broke into a run until she thought she heard her voice, Eleven immediately stopped to listen and hear who she was talking to.

"Yeah, I just didn't know who else to call. He-He-He gave me this number and he came here looking for her. I thought maybe he could help me. Yeah, Jim Hopper. He came here with someone named Joyce Byers. Well, that's a little hard to explain. There's another girl and she's missing, and I think she's in trouble. I just- I didn't know who to call," Aunt Becky spoke into the phone, pacing back and forth, smoking a cigarette.

Eleven had heard enough. She had no idea who she was talking to, but she had learned on the first day she escaped from the lab that the bad men listened to all of the phones and would come looking for her. She really didn't think Aunt Becky was trying to put her in danger, Eleven felt she was genuinely trying to help, but she didn't want Aunt Becky to be in danger either. Everyone around her got hurt. The nice man at the restaurant had done the same thing and gotten shot in the head by the bad lady. They threatened Mike. They would come for Aunt Becky too. It was best to leave and handle this on her own, so she wouldn't put anyone else in harm's way.

Even if the bad men didn't hear, Hopper would and then he would come to bring her back. She wasn't ready to go back, not yet.

So, she ran back to the kitchen, stole some money from Aunt Becky's wallet, grabbed her bag from the baby room, and sprinted out into the darkness as fast as she could, never looking back.

Eleven walked and walked and walked. She was used to it by now, but in the darkness of the woods she felt so alone. It reminded her of the night she left Mike's house the last time and had to hide under that log to evade the bad men. She also was here in the pouring rain on the first night she had escaped from the lab. That was also the night she met Mike, in these very woods when he found her and took her out of the storm.

As much as she wanted to completely forget him and let him move on with his life, Eleven couldn't do it. It hurt to think of him but it hurt worse to try and let him go. If she was going to be in agony either way, Eleven chose to keep his memory alive for now. She knew that if he were here, Mike would be supporting her and helping find this other girl, her sister. Mike always believed in her.

Eventually, all her walking led her to her first destination: the bus station. She had watched enough TV to get the gist of how to ride a bus and she knew the girl she was looking for was in Chicago because she got that feeling when she saw the bus stops. She figured out how to get on the right bus with the help of a nice attendant.

Rain streaked across the bus windows but Eleven was hardly aware of it as her thoughts were solely on finding her sister. Now that she was comfortable on the bus was headed in the right general direction, Eleven closed her eyes and held the picture, using her powers to hone in on where her sister was in the immense city she was traveling towards.

The image of her sister appeared near the fire again, this time Eleven backed out a little further and saw a dark alleyway, with various adults milling around. Her mind cut to an abandon warehouse where several people crowded around that fire. She knew where she needed to go now.

Eleven must have fallen asleep a little because she was startled awake when the bus came to a halt, the brakes squeaking loudly. She sat up quickly as the rest of the people still in the bus began making their way down the aisle and getting off. She gathered her bag, flung the strap over her head, and followed them out and onto the darkened streets.

There were so many people, so many different kinds of people. There were nice looking ladies all dressed up and serious looking policemen, and older boys with dark-skin like Lucas'. She kept her head down while passing the policemen but couldn't help the small smile that formed on her face as she stared up at the impossibly tall buildings. This is what the world was really like. This was freedom.

As she stood there, she was bumped into roughly by an man, who looked back at her as if it were her fault.

"Watch it, kid," he sneered back at her, before heading on his way. She glared after him, calling him a "mouthbreather," even if he could no longer hear.

Even just using the word brought back memories of Mike and how he

had used it to describe the bullies who had hurt him. She had made them pay. No one was allowed to hurt Mike. The familiar sting that came with thoughts of Mike pierced her heart, but Eleven needed to focus on finding her sister.

Again, she walked and walked, following where her powers were leading her. It seemed that the closer she felt like she was getting to her sister, the less and less people were around, until she was almost completely alone on the deserted streets.

That is, until she came to the alley she had imagined in her mind visit. Here there were lots of people, all dirty looking, all with cold eyes staring at her as she walked amongst them. Eleven wasn't afraid. She could protect herself with her powers, but she remained on guard because she got the sense that these were dangerous people.

One bald man stared right at her as she passed him and told her repeatedly with a cold laugh, "You're dead! You're all dead!"

She watched him even as she continued on, and then looked forward. The crowd of people had drastically thinned out, so he broke into a run, anxious to get to her destination. She was alone again after that and slowed to a walk now that she didn't feel she was in imminent risk. Trudging up the paved hill, Eleven spotted the door she had seen earlier with her powers. This was it. She was close now.

Opening the heavy metal door, Eleven stepped into the huge building, closing the door behind her. She walked slowly forward, glancing around the cold space, hearing voices ahead. The walls were covered in writing, some of it she understood but most she didn't so she continued her cautious approach until she saw the people from her mind visit.

There was the group of people talking around a fire. They hadn't noticed her yet, their conversation coming to a natural pause, so she called out to them, "Hello?"

Instantly, all of their eyes were on her, but she continued to slowly approach the strangers, emphasis on strange. They were surprised to see her, that much was clear, but the looks they gave her were far from fearful. More like a herd of lions eyeing their prey.

"Well, well, what do we have here?" a man with crazy red hair, spiked straight up said in an oily voice, rounding the barrel of fire and coming towards her.

"What is she wearing? What are those? Overalls?" a dark-skinned woman asked, following behind the crazy haired man, eliciting a laugh from him. Eleven wasn't bothered. She could handle bullies and bad people, but she wasn't here to hurt anyone.

"There aren't any cows to milk here, kid. Go on back to the farm now," a woman with multi-colored hair told her as she stood to look the new arrival.

"I'm looking for my sister," Eleven replied simply, feeling the crazy haired man circle behind her, and as he came up beside her, he smiled sarcastically over at the others.

"Aw, Shirley Temple lost her sister. So sad," he said, looking back at her in a way she didn't like. She needed to keep her eye on him.

"I saw her, here," Eleven insisted, ignoring their snide remarks and reaching down to grab the picture out of her jacket. The large black man didn't like that he shifted forward threateningly.

"Uh uh. Hand out of pocket, slow," he growled at her and she did as he said, not wanting to have to hurt anyone. She just wanted to find her sister, so she held the picture out for them to see.

"Give me that shit," crazy haired man hissed, snatching the newspaper clipping from her fingers. The others looked over his shoulder, then the black woman took it from him, and held it closer to her face in the dim light.

"Is-Is that Kali?" she asked in disbelief.

Eleven could sense the change in the room. While they may not have considered her a threat before, they certainly did now. If they had been dogs all of their hackles would have been raised judging by the way crazy-haired man was glaring at her.

"Kali?" Eleven asked, trying the name out. That must be her sister's name. It hadn't said in the article.

"How'd you find us?" the crazy haired man demanded, taking a menacing step forward. "Who else knows you're here?"

"No one," she told him, staring up at him, her eyes hard. She really didn't want to hurt anyone today.

"So, what then? Poof! You just show up like magic with that picture," he asked, all humor gone from his face.

"Stay calm, she's just a kid," the black woman spoke up, apparently sensing as Eleven had that the situation was on the verge of becoming violent.

"A kid that could get us all killed," he snarled back at her before addressing Eleven again, aggressively flipping out a knife, "If I have to ask you again, Shirley, you're gonna start losing things, starting with those pretty little locks of yours, yeah?"

Eleven instinctively recoiled from the weapon. His knife reminded her of when that mouth breather tried to hurt Mike. He had held Dustin at knifepoint and made Mike jump off the cliff. That had been a lot scarier than this because Mike had been the one in danger. He could have died. She had snapped that bully's arm, and while she wasn't keen on revealing her powers she wouldn't hesitate to do the same to this man if she absolutely had to.

"C'mon, Ax! Put down the knife!" the woman urged him anxiously, but he didn't listen, lifting the blade to point it at Eleven's face, demanding,

"How did you find us?"

"I saw her," she replied evenly. She wasn't afraid of him, just afraid of what she would do to him if he didn't get that knife out of her face.

"Ax!" the woman yelled again, but he just ignored her.

"That's not an answer!" he growled, this time grabbing her roughly by the arm. The last person who had done that had been Lucas before he realized she wasn't a traitor. She had thrown him across the field but that had been because he was hurting Mike. Eleven still held off on using her powers.

All of sudden, the man's eyes went wide with terror as he glanced at his wrist.

"Jesus!" he breathed, throwing the knife down and he started moving weird. It looked like he was trying to brush something off of himself that no one else could see. "Get off! Shit!"

"You're a terrible dancer, Axel," a voice from above spoke, all eyes followed the sound. Eleven saw a girl with brown skin and black hair, heavy makeup wearing all black. This was her sister. She knew it. This is how she had looked in her mind visit, so it had to be.

She was resting nonchalantly on the metal hand rail on the stairs but started to come down after she spoke. Eleven watched her approach with bated breath, her heart pounding in her chest with anticipation of this moment.

"I told you stay out of my head!" the crazy haired man- she called him Axel- yelled, slapping himself in the forehead to illustrate his point.

As she reached the bottom of the stairs and walked lazily over to the group, she asked, "So, we're threatening little girls now, are we?"

Her words were familiar but her accent strange. Eleven remembered from the article's title that it said it was an Indian girl lost in London, so that must be why she spoke differently.

"She knows about you!" Axel told her defensively and they all tightened the circle as the girl neared them.

"She had this," multi-colored hair offered her the newspaper clipping which she took and gazed down at briefly. It was subtle, but her demeanor had changed as well. Her eyes shifted up to look at Eleven, who stepped forward confidently.

"Where did you get this?" the girl they called Kali asked, holding the paper out. Eleven took it, put it back in her bag, and merely responded,

"Mama."

"Your mother gave this to you?" Kali asked doubtfully, but Eleven held her stare unflinchingly.

"In her dream circle," she replied, using the only words she could think of to describe her mind visit with Mama.

"Dream circle. I think she's a schizo or something," Axel scoffed, walking behind her.

"Says she's looking for her sister," the black woman added.

"Like I said, schizo," Axel repeated.

Eleven could tell they weren't going to believe her unless she used her powers. Not to mention, she was still having difficulty with words to describe all of this, so she was just going to have to show them then.

As Axel reached down to pick up his knife Eleven seized her opportunity. Using her powers effortlessly, Eleven shot the handle of the knife into her hand.

"Geez!" someone said in the background, but Eleven paid them no mind, looking lazily down at the blade in her hand. Maybe now they would take her seriously.

"I saw you," Eleven told Kali, folding the knife closed and holding it out to her, "in the rainbow room."

Kali circled around her slightly, her dark eyes watching her closely as she asked, "What is your name?"

Eleven thought about that for a moment. She'd had lots of names and she didn't really know who she was anymore. She had been given the number Eleven at the lab by Papa and the bad men... Mike had suggested the name El, she liked that the most, even Hopper had called her El. But she had recently discovered her real, given name had been Jane, so hoping Kali would understand and wondering if this is who she wanted to be, Eleven told her, "Jane."

Maybe by being Jane, she could start over and be the girl her Mama had wanted all along. Jane meant freedom and a new identity. But

she tried to ignore the slight pull in the back of her mind, telling her that she would always be El because Mike had suggested it to make her feel better. But she couldn't be El anymore. That life was gone now. So, now she was Jane.

Kali reached down and grabbed her left wrist pulling it up and pushing her sleeve up just enough to see the tattoo there, "011." Kali lifted her other wrist and Jane took it seeing the number there as well, "008."

In unison, they both looked up at one another, neither able to fully process what had just happened, what they had just discovered.

"Sister," Jane whispered, and Kali, eyes wide, repeated,

"Sister."

They wrapped their arms around each other in tight hug, Jane's face crumpling. Jane had never knew she had been missing this until she met Mama, but now that she had found her sister she didn't feel so alone.

Once, the utter shock and disbelief wore off slightly, Kali led her to the roof where they could have some privacy to talk. There was definitely a lot to talk about, but Kali was mostly interested in how Jane had found her and didn't talk too much about herself, even though that's what Jane was mostly curious about.

Regardless, Jane told her about how she had escaped the lab and gave her a very condensed version of what had happened last year, skipping over much of what happened. She didn't mention Mike by name. It would have been too hard. She wasn't ready to be that vulnerable with this girl, even if she was her sister, they had just met. And as for her feelings for Mike, still after all this time, she couldn't talk about them without wanting to drop everything, forget her promise to herself to stay away from him, and just run back to him.

"And this memory your mother shared...that is your only memory of me?" Kali asked gently, the sounds of the city around them slightly distracting to Jane, who was used to the relative silence of the lab and Hopper's cabin.

"Yes," Jane replied simply.

"And how long have you been with this policeman?"

"327 days," she said bitterly.

"And this policeman thinks he can work out some kind of deal with these men to set you free?" Kali summarized, her hands clasped in front of her. Jane could tell she had her doubts about Hopper's story and, at this point, so did Jane, or else she wouldn't be here right now.

"Yes. He says soon," Jane told her, and for some reason it felt like she was defending him a little. But why? After all of the lies he'd told? After keeping her from Mike and the outside?

"He's naïve then. We will always be monsters to them. Do you understand?" Kali told her fiercely and Jane nodded sadly in agreement.

The word monster had triggered another bittersweet memory of Mike. For a moment all she could see was his face above her after she had used her powers to save him from falling off the cliff as he told her that she was not the monster. His face was so pretty- handsome- and her heart hurt again. Almost everything reminded her of him and she knew this ache would never leave for as long as she lived. She would never forget the boy who ever made her feel like she was a pretty, good girl and not a monster.

"Now, let me guess, your policemen, he also stops you from using your gifts," Kali predicted and she nodded, thinking how the only other person to call them gifts was Papa. Mike called them her powers which she kind of liked. Powers meant powerful. Gifts made it sound like the bad men had given her something, like a present. And these gifts, powers, whatever didn't always feel like a good thing. "What you can do is incredible? It makes you very special, Jane."

That made Jane wonder, "Wait... do you have a gift?"

"Different. I can make people see, or not see whatever I choose," Kali told her, and Jane was intrigued and confused.

"Is that why you made the man with the crazy hair dance?"

Kali smiled at that, telling her, "Axel is not so fond of spiders, so...."

"You made him see spiders," Jane inferred, impressed.

"But it doesn't have to be scary," she said and held out her hand and opened it, revealing a beautiful butterfly with wings that glowed in the dark and changed colors. Jane watched entranced as the butterfly began to take flight almost not hearing Kali tell her, "This butterfly isn't real. I've just convinced your mind of it. Think of it as a kind of magic."

Jane reached up and took a swipe at the butterfly, still not convinced that it wasn't real. But as it flew downwards, Kali caught it in her fist and she then opened it to reveal her empty palm.

"Are you real?"

"Yes, I'm real," Kali replied with a smile, and Jane jokingly poked her in the face a couple of times before Kali playfully slapped her hand away.

As much fun as she was having with her newfound sister, Jane had come a long way tonight and she was extremely tired. Kali seemed to sense this and led her back inside. She offered her a bed up high with glass windows all around. While Jane got comfortable, taking off her coat, Kali brought her a bright orange blanket. After handing it to her, instead of leaving, Kali sat down in a chair next to the bed, her eyes glassy.

"What's wrong?" Jane asked concerned.

"Nothing is wrong. I just feel whole, like a piece of me was missing and now it's not, if that makes sense," Kali explained to her, sniffing as tears seemingly pooled in the corner of her eyes.

"Yes." She understood, but as relieved as she was to have finally found her sister, Jane still only felt a little more than halfway happy. Pieces of her were missing too. She missed the Dustin piece, and the Lucas piece, and the Will piece, and the Mrs. Byers piece, and the Mama piece, and the Aunt Becky piece, and even the Hopper piece.

But the piece she missed most was the Mike piece. She may be able to be okay without those other pieces, but she'd never be whole without him.

"I think your mother sent you here for a reason. I think she somehow knew that we belonged together. I think this is your home," Kali continued tearfully.

Jane had been hearing that word a lot. Lab was home. Mike's fort was home. The cabin with Hopper was home. Mama's house with Becky was home. And now this?

"Home," she repeated, hoping that maybe this could be it this time. Mike's fort would always be her favorite home, but she couldn't go back there, or to any of those places. So, this would have to do. Kali smiled warmly at her and they clasped hands as her sister confirmed,

"Yes, home."

Day 329. Well, Jane didn't really need to count the days anymore, did she? She was no longer at the cabin waiting for soon, waiting to see Mike, just waiting. She was Jane now; free and home with her sister.

But despite that, as Jane slept her dreams took her on a mind visit to the cabin. It was empty. The radio crackled to life with a familiar voice,

"It's me. I know that I've been gone too long and-uh- I just want you to know it's not because of you and it's not because of our fight. Just something came up and I'll explain everything soon. I just-uh- I want you to know that I'm not mad at you. I'm just sorry."

Jane was surprised that he was talking through the radio. He said that was a risk and risks are stupid. So, why did he take the risk just to say sorry?

Her question would remain unanswered because she was shaken awake. Jane's eyes flew open and Kali's face came into view above her, assuring her, "It's okay. It's only me."

Jane sat up slightly as Kali asked, "Bad dream?"

That was not a question she wanted to answer. She had meant to visit Hopper, even his voice, and she was mad at herself for even feeling guilty about leaving him. She changed the subject quickly.

"What time is it?"

"It's late. You slept well. It's time you met my friends, properly this time," Kali answered, give her shoulder a comforting squeeze and then standing up from the bed. Jane pulled on her coat and allowed Kali to lead her down the stairs. As they rounded the corner, the crazy haired man appeared, telling Kali in annoyance,

"We need more money, Kal. I can't keep eating this garbage."

"This is Axel," Kali introduced but Jane had already gleaned that last night.

"Spider-hater," she said, eliciting a laugh from someone in the group.

"Yes, spider-hater," Kali agreed, humor in her voice as well.

"This is Dottie, our newest, like you she just left home," Kali continued and the girl with multi-colored hair gave her a small, insincere smile and wave.

"You mean the loony bin," Axel corrected, but Kali ignored him and continued,

"Mick, our eyes, our protector."

The dark-skinned woman looked up briefly at the mention of her name from whatever she was writing, but quickly got back to it as they passed.

"This is Funshine, our warrior, don't let his size frighten you. He's a teddy bear," Kali announced the large black man as he sidled up to her and offered her his hand, which she accepted.

"Nice to meet you, Ms. Jane," he greeted, much friendlier than he spoke to her last night. He was a really big man, but she wasn't afraid. She had killed big men. Pushing that morbid thought from her mind, Jane turned their joined hands to look at his wrist.

"If you're looking for a number, you won't find one," Kali informed her, sensing the question she had been about to ask.

"They're not like us," Jane said as Kali sat down at the table.

"No, not in that way, but like us they're outcasts," Kali replied, but Jane didn't understand.

"Outcasts?"

"Freaks," Axel defined and that struck Jane. After all, before Lucas had gotten to know her, he had called her a freak and a weirdo. So, she must be like these people. Is this what it meant to be a freak? An outcast?

"Speak for yourself," Dottie added, bringing a cigarette to her lips.

"Society has left them behind, hurt them, discarded them," Kali elaborated.

"We were dead, all of us," Funshine told her, a somber look on his face as he gazed up at her. "Kali saved us, here," he pointed to his head and then to his chest, "and here."

"Don't get all mushy on us, Fun," Kali said, lightly reprimanding.

"No, no mushy. True," he held firm.

"Now, we help her," Mick added.

"In this life, kid: you roll over or you fight back," Axel told her.

"We're all fighters here," Mick said proudly.

"Fight who?" Jane asked, gazing around at each of the people seated at the table. In response, Kali grabbed dropped a pile of plastic cards with faces on them, like the ones the bad men wore at the lab.

"Everyone you see here, was in some way responsible for what happened to us," Kali explained, the rest of the crew standing behind her. They were watching her carefully and Jane got the sense that they were waiting for something from her.

"You hurt the bad men?" she asked, raising an eyebrow.

"No, we just give them a pat on the back," Dottie said sarcastically, but Jane knew what she really meant.

"You kill them?" Jane didn't know if she liked where this was going. Yes, they were bad men who deserved to be punished but they weren't actively trying to hurt them. It seemed wrong to go seek them out to kill them when there was no immediate danger.

"They're criminals. We simply make them pay for their crimes," Kali explained simply.

"Damn, Shirley. What's the matter? You look like you've seen a ghost," Axel teased her. This made Jane angry. These people didn't even know her; didn't know the things she had done, the things she was capable of.

"We can't all be fighters, I guess," Dottie said, and Jane took that as a challenge to prove herself.

"I'm a fighter. I've killed," Eleven told them quickly. She remembered in vivid detail the sound of the man's neck snapping when he tried to lock her in the dark room in the lab after she refused to hurt the cat. Or the feeling of crushing all of the bad people's brains when they pointed a gun at Mike and her and her friends.

But as much as she wanted to prove herself to these people, and as much as she wanted to sound cold and indifferent, she wasn't proud of that. Hurting people didn't feel good. It was something she had to do to survive and protect Mike.

"These men you killed... did they deserve it?" Kali asked, her stare intense.

"They hurt me," Jane answered, remembering the men dragging her to the dark room.

"And they still want to hurt you, to hurt us. We're just making the first move," Kali asserted, but Jane still wasn't sure. Kali seemed to pick up on this because she nodded her head towards the door and said, "Come."

Jane followed Kali out of the warehouse and into the bright afternoon sunlight. As they walked amongst the abandon cars and scrap metal, Kali spoke, "I was just like you once, I kept my anger inside. I tried to hide from it but then that pain festered."

"Festered?" Jane asked, unfamiliar with that word. Kali stopped and looked at her, so Jane did the same, her sister's dark eyes lost in memories.

"It spread... until finally I confronted my pain and I began to heal," Kali explained, walking forward again and leading her into a wide abandoned area. They had to hop down onto train tracks, but then Kali stopped again and gestured with her head further on, "Do you see that train?"

"Yes."

"I want you to draw it toward us." Kali had been looking straight ahead at the train, but now glanced sideways at her with a challenging look. Jane had never moved anything that big before and she highly doubted she'd be able to do it without Mike or herself being in danger. Despite that, she decided to give it a try; her gifts had been getting stronger after all.

Planting her feet and raising her hand towards the hunk of metal, Jane focused solely on bringing the train closer. She imagined her hand was a powerful magnet and the train would slide towards them. Its immense weight began to lift off of its wheels for a moment and even rock forward slightly, but the effort was too much. Her vision was getting fuzzy and her head seared with pain.

Jane exhaled heavily, leaning her hands on her knees in exhaustion, disappointed in her weakness.

"I can't," she said softly in defeat, but Kali wasn't ready for her to give up.

"Last night, you told me you lifted a van once," Kali reminded her and Jane thoughts immediately pictured the bad men's van coming straight at her, Mike, Dustin, and Lucas. She could still recall in great detail the feeling of being so close to Mike and the fear and anger she

felt when she realized they were going to hurt her friends just to get to her. She hadn't even really tried or given it much thought. Her adrenaline had been racing and she needed to protect Mike, so she had lifted the van as if it weighed nothing with what felt like very minimal effort, until she felt so drained afterwards.

"Yes."

"The bad men were trying to take you away again and that made you angry," Kali went on and again. Jane hadn't revealed that was only part of the reason she had been angry. She had been able to lift that van because it was going to hit Mike. Again, she could see the Papa and the bad men getting out of their vans and walking towards her and Mike while she clutched his jacket.

"Good. So, find that anger. Focus on that, not the train, not its weight," Kali told her, and Jane was angry again just remembering how the bad men had put Mike in danger. She decided to try again. Lifting her hand once more, Jane let her anger course through her as she listened to Kali.

"I want you to find something from your life, something that angers you now," Kali egged her on and for some reason the first image that popped into Jane's mind was the red headed girl making Mike smile. "Now, channel it."

The train barely moved again; it wasn't going to be enough.

"Dig deeper. Your whole life you've been lied to," Kali urged, and Jane's thoughts shifted to Hopper telling her that Mama was gone. That made her very angry.

Jane's heart began to race and her blood began to feel like fire burning through her veins. The train began to slide towards them, its wheels dragging on the ground kicking up sparks.

"Imprisoned," Kali spat angrily, mirroring the way Jane now felt.

Jane remembered the feeling of being thrown into the dark room at the lab and Hopper keeping her locked in the cabin for 327 days and how he had yelled at her for wanting to see Mike.

"The bad men took away your home, you mother."

Images of her Mama's dream circle floating back to her, and the train moved closer, moving at great speed towards them now.

"They took everything from you. They stole your life, Jane!" Kali yelled next to her.

Papa making her find the monster, putting her in the bath, manipulating her, using her. All of it seemed to cave in on her at once. Papa and the bad men were the reason she could never have a normal life with Mike, why she would always be an outcast.

A scream escaped her throat as she released every ounce of anger that was left in her, her powers spent. The train came to a stop.

Jane fell to her knees in exhaustion, just catching herself with her hands before she hit the concrete. From up above the tracks, Axel, Dottie, Mick, and Funshine cheered for her. She wasn't ready to call them friends but they made her feel part of something which felt nice.

She shifted so she came to sit on the ground, taking deep gulps of air as the adrenaline seeped out of her blood stream. Kali came to kneel next to her and with a smile, asked, "So, how do you feel?"

That was a complicated question. She was tired and still angry, but she felt powerful, like she could do anything and no one could hurt her, so she replied,

"Good."

Kali helped her up off the ground and they made their way back to the warehouse with the others. After a quick meal to replenish her energy, Kali let her in on their plans.

They went into a room lit with bright, fluorescent bulbs; it had a wall with various pictures and other clippings on it. Kali explained, "These are the bad men, as you call them, the ones we believe are still alive. Do you know any?"

Jane scanned the pictures, some had writing on them, some didn't.

No one looked recognizable until...

"Him," she pulled down a black and white newspaper clipping with the headline, 'Retired!' She recognized the man not from her own memories, but from Mama's dream circle. He was the one that zapped her brain when Papa said to. "He hurt Mama,"

"His name is Ray Carroll and he did more than hurt your mother," Kali replied, not elaborating on what she meant but Jane suspected he had hurt her too. "The bad men like Ray know about us, it's made them hard to track, but maybe not anymore."

She could feel Kali's eyes on hers and Jane knew what she had to do. She explained to them what she would need to use her gifts and it was set up for her: a small radio with the white noise, a blindfold, and the picture of the man crumpled in her fist.

Sitting on a short table, Jane could feel all of their eyes on her but she still was able to go into her mind visit. He was easier to find than she thought, sitting in his chair watching TV as if he was normal and not the bad man he is. Jane ripped the clipping apart in her hands in anger and then pulled the blindfold down, nodding to them.

She was able to describe the building she had seen the man in and the writing outside of it. Dottie flipped open a big book and found the name, "Gramercy Apartments. Washington and Bethel, that's gotta be it. Right?"

"Lilburn... where's that?" Kali asked, taking the book from Dottie and sitting back in her chair.

"About an hour east," Funshine replied thoughtfully.

"We don't even have a new ride," Mick argued, frustration clear in her demeanor.

"So, we swap the plates, we have plates, right?" Kali suggested, undeterred.

"Yeah," Axel said slowly.

"It's risky," Mick shot back.

"Where is the fun if there's no risk?" Kali said and Jane thought this is the opposite of what Hopper had said. He said risks make you stupid. "We want to give my sister a memorable first day, right?"

"I'm in, for Miss Jane," Funshine agreed, tilting his head to look at Jane.

"Yeah, sure. Why not?" Axel said, before all eyes turned to the protector, "Mick?"

Mick looked up at the ceiling for a moment, considering, and then finally threw her hands up and exclaimed, "Screw it!"

There was a flurry of activity after that and Jane stood with everyone else, unsure of what she should do. Kali came up behind her and grabbed her by the shoulders, an excited smile on her face. As the others got ready, Kali insisted that Dottie help her get ready by changing her look. Apparently, overalls weren't very intimidating.

So, Dottie sat her down in a chair upstairs and Kali brought some clothes. Jane looked at them apprehensively but went along with it. She wanted to fit in with these outcasts.

Dottie sat her backwards and began combing her mass of curls back and away from her face. Jane was a little concerned, considering Dottie's hair looked like a mess in her opinion. Maybe someone else should be doing this? But Jane said nothing.

Jane got dressed and then Dottie finished her makeup, some dark eye shadow and red for her lips. She was briefly transported back to when Mike had done something similar, so she would fit in with his classmates at school. He had put on very different makeup and given her Nancy's nice dress. The black jacket and jeans were very different, but that was okay because that was El and maybe this is who Jane was. Yet, she couldn't help but wonder what Mike would think of how she looked. Would he think she was still pretty? Good?

"Bitchin'," Dottie said as the group stared at her transformation.

"Bitchin'," Jane echoed, testing out the new word.

They all headed down to the old van and piled in, driving off to find

the bad man. As Mick drove them all, she turned up the music really loud. Axel swung his head wildly and Dottie used the table as a makeshift drum. It was fun to watch these people, so wild and free, exactly how she was beginning to feel. No one could control her now.

They all had masks that they wore whenever they did a "job" as they called it, and now Kali held several up to her face to help her decide on one. All the while, Jane laughed and rocked her head to the strange music too. It was nothing like the music Hopper listened to, maybe that's why she liked it. Either way, eventually Jane settled on a baby face mask, getting approval from Kali and Dottie.

Suddenly, Mick pulled the van to a stop at an unfamiliar place. This wasn't where the bad man lived. So, as everyone jumped out Jane put her hand on Kali's shoulder, asking nervously, "What are we doing?"

"Stocking up," she replied simply, so Jane hopped out to and followed the group in. Kali stepped up to the man at the counter and crossed her arms over her chest. "Hey, your bathroom is leaking."

He looked confused but leaned forward to glance over to the bathroom, his eyes going wide, "Ah, shit!"

Jane didn't see anything, but she assumed Kali was using her powers to make him see what she wanted him to see as he stepped delicately around something that wasn't there.

"Yes. Shit," Kali replied, a smug smile on her face. As the man went into the bathroom, Axel stepped up and addressed them all jokingly,

"Okay, contestants, you have a minute and a half to begin your supermarket sweep!"

Jane had stolen from a store before when Mike had yelled at her for throwing Lucas. He hadn't meant it but she had known she shouldn't have done it so she ran away to protect them all from herself. She had gotten so hungry staying the woods that she walked right into the supermarket and stolen several boxes of Eggo's, walking right out by slamming the glass sliding doors in the owner's face. It hadn't felt right then but she had been so hungry.

All of the others were picking up what they wanted, so what would be the harm in taking a few things? At first she picked up an apple, but then her eyes landed on the freezers. Eggo's. Immediately, she put the apple back and grabbed several boxes until she heard an angry voice towards the front of the store.

"Hey! Put that back or I'll blow your head off!" the man threatened, pointing a gun at Axel, "You hear me, freak!"

Jane's heart began to race. She really didn't like guns.

Kali stepped up quickly with her hands up, telling him, "Put the gun down."

"Stay back! Stay back!" he ordered, and Jane could hear how nervous he was. He pointed the gun back and forth between Kali and Axel.

"Darrel, your money is insured. We're only stealing from the war criminal billionaires who own this place. You won't even lose a dime," Kali assured him calmly, but he wasn't hearing any of it.

"I said, stay back!" he growled, stepping closer to her aggressively.

"We are on the same side. I promise," Kali kept her voice even. She made a promise. Jane doubted they were on the same side if they were stealing from him.

Jane watched her. Kali wasn't using her gifts. Maybe her words were just as powerful, able to convince people to see or not see whatever she chose as well.

"Stay back," he repeated, and Jane wasn't comfortable with how close that gun was to her newfound sister. With a roar, she used her power to fling him into the wall, knocking him unconscious.

"Damn, Shirley," Axel said appreciatively as they crowded to look down at him. But they didn't have long to stand there because the sound of sirens could be heard outside.

"Let's go. Go, go, go," Funshine hissed, ushering them out of the store.

"Mick! We gotta go, Mick!" Axel yelled, and they all piled in, Mick

driving them away quickly.

The police must have not seen them because no one followed them. They drove for a while more, the sun having fully set by the time they pulled into the apartment complex.

Mick slowed the van to a stop and then turned to them in the back, "We should case the place, stick to the routine. We have time."

"We also have her," Kali responded impatiently, taking a more softer tone when she turned to Jane, "Can you look?"

Jane closed her eyes and focused her mind on the bad man, and then there he was, "He's watching television."

"Is he alone?" Mick asked.

"I saw him and no one else," Jane replied, shaking her head slightly. Her mind visits typically only showed the person she was looking for, if there were other people there she'd have to know what they look like to find them too.

"Good enough for me," Kali said.

"Me too," Dottie concurred.

"Let's do this," Funshine said, putting on his mask.

"Keep it running," Kali ordered to Mick

"Meet you round back," Mick told her.

They all slipped on their masks, and all but Mick got out of the van, approaching the bad man's apartment. Jane then slipped the chain off its track, as she was rather adept at now, and shut his TV off with her powers. As he fiddled with the knobs, they snuck up behind him stealthily.

"Hello, Ray," Kali greeted, the others behind her. The big man looked up startled, his eyes going wide with fear.

"Jesus Christ!" he exclaimed, trying to run for the door, but Funshine

was there to block his path.

"Sit down, please," Funshine ordered him, his voice low and dangerous, "I said sit."

Funshine grabbed the man roughly by the shoulders and forced him back into his chair.

"Just please... just take what you want," the man begged, fearfully.

"Oh, we will," Axel assured him.

"Where's your wallet?" Dottie demanded.

"Bedroom. My bedroom. My jeans," he revealed without any further coaxing.

Axel and Dottie rushed off to go find the wallet, Funshine blocked the doorway, so Kali and Jane stepped in front of the bad man. Jane tried to look more confident than she felt as Kali took off her mask and looked at her so Jane took hers off as well hesitantly.

"Do you remember us?" Kali asked the man and he shook his head adamantly. At his response, Kali must have used her powers to make him see them as he would have remembered them, little girls, as the lights flickered, "What about us? Do you remember us, Ray?"

The lights flickered again and Kali hit the man hard in the face as Jane watched. He fell to the floor and looked up at them with a pleading look, "Please, please."

Now, seeing his face from Mama's dream circle that anger was taking hold again.

"You hurt Mama," she growled, before throwing him against the wall with her powers. He hit his head hard and began to bleed. Jane didn't feel any better. If anything she felt worse which only made her angrier.

"Wait. Please, I just did what he told me to do. He said she was sick," Ray explained in a shaky voice, sitting up slightly with effort.

"You had a choice, Ray, and you chose to follow a man you knew was evil," Kali replied calmly after they had both stepped closer to him. Jane could feel her hate of this man growing the longer she looked at him. Papa had told her to do a lot of things, bad things, and she had eventually stood up to him when he told her to hurt the cat. The difference was that Ray hurt people, children even. Ray should have been able to stop it, but he didn't. Jane raised her hand to use her powers but she stopped as he begged,

"Wait! Wait! I can help you find him."

Jane glared down at this man. Her rage making it hard to think clearly.

"Find who?" Kali demanded.

"Brenner! I can take you to him," Ray shouted back quickly in fear they would hurt him if he didn't.

Jane stopped breathing for a minute. But she reminded herself that she had seen Papa get attacked by the Demogorgon.

"Papa is gone," Jane managed to say despite her pounding heart.

"No, he is alive," he insisted.

"Do not lie to us, Ray," Kali threatened.

"I'm not lying," Ray's face crumpled as he began to cry in fear, but he managed to whimper, "He trusts me. I'll take you to him."

Jane stood there staring at this man. He was terrified. Of her. This was ultimate power, so why did she not feel good?

"If he is alive, Jane will find him, just as she found you," Kali told him, dispassionately, turning to her and urging, "Do it, Jane. Do it."

"Wait!" he begged, but the images of her Mama's dream circle had invaded her mind again and the fire in her chest raged bigger than ever. Her hand shot out and she began crushing his wind pipe with her mind. He fell to the ground, trying to gasp for the air she wouldn't allow him to have, but she didn't stop. She heard Kali's

voice, pushing her on,

"Not too quick. He wasn't so generous with your mother."

The force of her powers was causing him to slide along the tiled floor on his back, but she followed, unrelenting. Even as his face became red and then purple, she squeezed harder, white hot rage blinding her to his agony.

Until her eyes slid from him to a broken frame by his head. A picture of him and two young girls stared up at her. He had children. She immediately released him and he gasped for air.

"What's wrong? What's wrong?" Kali demanded to know, but Jane couldn't speak. What had she almost done?

"We got a problem," Axel and Dottie appeared from down the hall and Kali turned to look over at them.

"Kids in the apartment," Dottie added.

"Please," the man continued to beg, but now she realized it was more for his daughters than for himself. Jane was a lot of things, but she wasn't going to murder a man who wasn't trying to hurt her, knowingly making orphans out of two girls. Not like her.

"Did he show your mother mercy? No. He took her from you without hesitation," Kali reminded her unnecessarily.

"We gotta go, K. They called the cops," Axel yelled from the hall, bouncing anxiously on the balls of his feet.

"We finish this first," Kali she growled at him before turning to bellow at her, "Jane! NOW!"

"Please, don't. Please," the man continued to plead for his life from his spot on the floor.

In a flash, Kali seemingly lost her patience because she whipped a gun out of her pocket and pointed it down at the bad man. Jane couldn't allow this to happen. On instinct, Jane jerked her head to the side and the gun flung out of Kali's hand and out the window.

Jane knew she had crossed a line as Kali's eye slid over to her dangerously.

There was no time to discuss it though.

"Kali, we gotta go," Axel insisted as sirens sounded outside. They all sprinted out of the apartment and down the stairs, rushing to where Mick pulled the van up. The tires squealed as she sped away, narrowly avoiding the police again.

Jane sat back, trying to catch her breath and process everything that had just happened. She had almost killed someone, and not in self-defense and not to protect her friends, or Mike. Mike. What would Mike think of her?

"If you wanted to show mercy that's your choice, but don't you ever take away mine. Ever. Do you understand? Do you understand?!" Kali shouted at her, getting right in her face in the narrow confines of the van. Jane just turned her head away. She didn't even care that her sister was mad at her. Could she even call this girl her sister? She was a cold-blooded killer, and Jane was sure now that's not who she wanted to be.

When they returned to their warehouse, Jane immediately went up to her space, she couldn't really call it a room, and it definitely wasn't home. She sat in the chair, clutching the shirt Hopper had given her and thinking about what she was going to do now. She never wanted to do what she had just done again. She felt used, but Kali was right, she had a choice. And she had chosen wrong.

Kali and the others had convinced her to use her powers to actively seek out and take from someone who did nothing wrong at the gas station and then try to kill someone who wasn't actively trying to harm them. It wasn't right and it didn't 'heal' her the way Kali made her think it would. It made her feel like a monster all over again.

A knock startled her out of her reverie and she looked over to see Kali at the entrance.

"May I sit?" she asked, and Jane just shrugged her shoulders. She didn't really want her to, but what choice did she have. She was a

guest in their home.

Kali walked over to her, sitting down on the bed, and clasping her hands in front of her before she spoke, "I was once just like you, you know that? But that's why I'm hard on you because I see in you my past mistakes."

Not killing that man wasn't a mistake.

"They were kids," she said with defiance.

"Does that excuse that man's sins? Were we not also children?" Kali asked, not expecting an answer, so Jane looked away. Just because he was a monster didn't mean they needed to become one too. "I remember the day I came to the rainbow room and you were gone. So, when my gifts were strong enough I used them to escape and I ran away, I ran as far as I could. And it was there, far away that I found a place to hide, a family, a home. Just like you and your policeman, but they couldn't help me. So, eventually I lost them too."

As she spoke, Jane couldn't help but think of how she had lost Mike. Her heart hurt again, but she tried very hard not to cry, even as Kali continued telling her story.

"So, I decided to play the part, to stop hiding, to start using my gifts to fight those that hurt us. You're now faced with the same choice, Jane. Go back into hiding and hope they don't find you or fight and face him again," Kali told her.

"Face who?" Jane asked, not really wanting to hear the answer.

"The man who calls himself our father," Kali said pointedly.

"Papa is dead," Jane said fiercely, but then a voice behind her made her blood run cold.

"That man tonight disagreed."

Jane wheeled around, her mouth agape in surprise to see the tall figure of Papa in the doorway, his hands clasped behind his back, his dark eyes sending a shiver up her spine. But it wasn't him.

"You're not real," she said with effort, but still feeling the need to stand and face him more fully.

"All this time and you haven't looked for me. Why? Because you thought I was dead? Or because you were afraid of what you might find," he continued in his gravelly voice. Even if her mind knew he was not real, her heart didn't, based on the way it was pounding against her rib cage. Facing the man who had hurt and manipulated her for so many years made the blood in her veins turn to ice.

"Go away," she told him firmly, shaking her head even as tears pooled in her eyes. He began to approach her slowly, towering over her and making her feel small. She inhaled sharply and stepped back and away from him as he spoke softly,

"You have to confront your pain. You have a wound, Eleven, a terrible wound and it's festering. Do you remember what that means? Festering? It means a rot and it will grow. Spread."

She fell back into her chair when she could retreat no further. The word, 'festering' made it even more obvious that he wasn't real but the terror she was feeling was very real. Like the way Axel was afraid of the spiders. All rational thought was leaving her and she felt paralyzed.

"Get out of my head," she said quietly, tears streaming down her face, as he knelt down to her eye level.

"And eventually it will kill you," he told her, and she couldn't take it anymore.

"GET OUT OF MY HEAD!" she screamed at the top of her lungs, crushing her eyelids closed so she wouldn't have to see his face anymore. She broke down into sobs, the memories of him and the lab and the possibility of him being alive suffocating her.

Kali stood and rounded to kneel in front of her. Jane was angry with her. Kali shouldn't have done that. It was wrong to manipulate her that way with her powers.

"This isn't a prison, Jane. You're always free to return to your

policeman or stay and avenge your mother. Let us heal our wounds together," Kali spoke passionately, before standing up and leaving her alone with her tears.

Eventually her tears subsided and her breathing returned to normal, leaving only dry trails on her cheeks making the skin of her cheeks feel tight. Jane went over to the bed to sit. For a moment she thought she could stay, go to sleep, and wake up okay with this new life she had chosen for herself. But could she really choose a life of anger and hurting people? She wanted a life with happy, even halfway happy, and not having to kill anyone anymore.

Holding the plaid shirt Hopper had given her when she lived with him in the cabin, Jane knew what she had to do. She had to see them.

Instead of channeling her anger as Kali told her to, Jane channeled every happy memory she could find and she was surprised to find she had several powerful ones. She clutched the shirt to her chest and focused on those memories.

'Maybe we can call you El, short for Eleven,' Mike's pretty face appeared; dark hair offsetting his pale skin and complimenting his equally warm, dark eyes. He had just taken her out of the storm and she felt safe, safer than she had ever felt in her entire life.

The memory shifted to another.

'You better run, she's our friend and she's crazy!' Dustin yelling at the mouth breathers after she had just pulled Mike back from the cliff and certain death. Dustin had called her friend.

And another.

'No, El, you're not the monster. You saved me, understand? You saved me.' Mike insisted, staring down at her from her place on the dirty ground when she collapsed. He smiled at her and it made her feel so happy.

And another.

'Co-compromise?' she asked Hopper and he explained, 'It's something in between, it's like half-way happy.' Hopper ruffling her hair while they ate

breakfast together.

'Once we fix it up it'll be nice, real nice. It's your new home,' Hopper dancing to music in the cabin, the home he made up just for her.

Then, she was transported into her mind visit effortlessly.

Hopper was there, but he wasn't wearing his normal policeman uniform. No, he was in hospital scrubs, and he was in front of some kind of electronic thing that looked like it was at the lab. Why was Hopper at the lab? Why did he look so upset?

'This is where I was, It's a damn graveyard,' he said to someone she couldn't see.

'I need to get through! I need to get through!' Mike's voice behind her made her snap around. Terror gripped her, making her heart freeze and her breathing to cease as she watched him run towards or away from something or someone, in obvious distress.

'I need to warn them it's a trap!' Mike continued yelling and she watched as he seemed to run into something hard as he came to an abrupt stop, 'I need to get through! It's a trap! I need to tell them it's a trap! IT'S A TRAP! IT'S A TRAP!' Mike shouted, struggling against something holding him.

Blood pounded in her hears as she watched him, her eyes wide with terror. What was wrong? What was a trap? Who was holding him? What was a trap? Was someone hurting him? Was he in danger?

Unthinkingly, Jane ran towards him, throwing her arms around him, but they cut through thin air as Mike's image dissolved into smoke. She felt like her chest was being ripped open as she screamed,

"MIKE! MIKE! MIKE!' WHERE ARE YOU?! MIKE!

Loud banging caused her to cease her screams and look towards the sound, fearfully.

Then she was pulled out of her mind visit and the banging continued. Jane jumped up from the bed to look down out of the glass window. Policemen with guns streamed into the warehouse.

"Don't move!" they yelled, pointing their guns all around.

"Let's go," Kali whispered, seemingly appearing out of nowhere and grabbing her shoulder. They sprinted up to the upper level to get the others, Jane's mind still reeling from what she had seen in her mind visit.

"What the hell's going on?" Axel demanded.

"They found us," Kali told them, "No, no, no."

And she gestured at them all to remain still. She used her powers to hide them until the policemen walked away. Once in the clear they ran out and towards the van. They saw them. The policemen began firing their guns and Jane's heart began to race. She wasn't ready to die. Mike needed her.

They all dove for cover behind the van as bullets collided with the metal, pinging off the surface. Axel pulled out his gun and fired back.

"Do something, Kal, do something," he hissed. And she did.

Closing her eyes, Kali's nose began to drip blood as she did something to make the men stop approaching or shooting.

They all piled in but Jane stopped.

"Jane, get in," Kali urged her, her dark eyes wide with fear and adrenaline.

"I'm sorry. I'm sorry, but I have to go back. My friends, my friends are in danger," she told her. She had to save Mike like he had saved her.

"This isn't time for a talk! We gotta go right now!" Axel yelled from behind Kali.

"Your mother sent you here for a reason, remember? We belong together. There's nothing back there for you. They cannot save you, Jane," Kali tried to convince her and maybe she was right but it didn't matter. Mike needed her and she couldn't waste another second.

"No, but I can save them," Jane told her, shaking her head but

determined. She was making a choice, and she chose Mike. She would always choose Mike.

Without another word, she turned and ran away down a dark alley, tears streaming down her cheeks.

"JANE! JANE! JANE!" Kali called out to her, but the van began pulling away.

Jane ran until she couldn't run anymore. Then she walked and walked until she got back to that same bus station she had arrived at, and purchased a ticket back to Hawkins, Indiana.

Now, she sat just as she had on the way there, her forehead pressed against the cool glass, watching the rain streak on the window. The adrenaline had left her, but that didn't stop her mind from racing, the sound of Mike's screams echoing in her ears.

"You all right, Sweetie?" a woman's voice pulled her from her thoughts and Jane turned to look over at the source. "You were looking a little forlorn there. You mind if I join you?"

Jane didn't reply but glanced down at the empty seat as the woman shifted over next to her. She didn't need a distraction but it wasn't entirely unwelcome.

"You are awfully young to be travelling alone, aren't you?" the nice woman commented with a smile that Jane didn't return. "You are quite the chatterbox. So, where you headed? To your parents, I hope."

Normally, the mention of parents would be a painful reminder of how she had none, but she didn't need them. She had a Hopper, and a Dustin, and a Lucas, and a Mrs. Byers, and a Will, and a Nancy, and a Jonathan, but most importantly she had a Mike. El had a Mike.

Jane, or rather El, responded, "I'm going to my friends. I'm going home."

A/N: Whoa, from the shortest chapter to the longest chapter! So, Eleven typically refers herself by 'Eleven' but this chapter she

was mostly Jane. Don't worry the whole Jane thing was just for this chapter. I did this to illustrate her trying to figure out her identity. Now, she has chosen to be El. I hope it's not too confusing. Anyways, we're almost there! The big reunion! I am so unbelievably excited to get to it. The last couple of chapters have been soooo slow but it'll all be worth it for the last two chapters! Maybe three if I'm feeling an epilogue... As always, you guys are amazing and let me know what you think!

8. Chapter 8: The Mind Flayer

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CHAPTER 8: THE MIND FLAYER

As much as Mike struggled against the soldiers and Bob, it was no use. Despite the fact that Mike was almost as tall as the older man, Bob had a lot more bulk to hold him back. Eventually, Bob was able to gain control and lightly shove Mike against a wall, effectively subduing him.

Taking a moment to catch his breath, Mike prepared to explain to him what was going on, but then alarms began blaring all around them. Mike's gut had already told him that the soldiers were dead but the alarms only confirmed his suspicion.

"What the hell?" Bob said as he glanced up at the yellow flashing lights, continuing to hold Mike against the wall but a little more loosely in his distraction.

"We're too late," Mike said more to himself than to Bob, realization hitting him. He was angry at himself for not seeing it sooner and promising Will that they wouldn't let the shadow monster spy back on them. He had been wrong and now those men had died; Mike was sure of it.

"What?" Bob still wasn't getting it.

"We're too late!" Mike yelled in his face. Taking advantage of Bob's surprise, Mike shoved his hands off him and ran back towards Will's room.

"What's going on?" Mrs. Byers spun to face them, confusion creasing her already worried brow.

"We're under attack," Mike said, skidding to a stop in front of her. His heart was racing in his chest, fear and adrenaline coursing through

him. His eyes darted around the room, looking for something, anything that they could use to knock Will out. They landed on a couple of syringes the nurses had left behind, full of the sedatives that had knocked Will out the last time. Mike snatched up a syringe from the counter and ordered, "We need to make Will sleep."

"What?" Mrs. Byers confusion had transformed into incredulousness. She looked at Mike as if he had lost his mind, and maybe he had, but so had Will and as his friend had said before, maybe they were going to go crazy together.

There wasn't time to explain everything, but he had to try and get his point across and fast, "He's a spy! If he knows where we are so does the shadow monster!"

"He's lying!" Will screamed at him immediately, something the real Will would never do.

"He killed those soldiers and he'll kill us too!" Mike yelled right back, directing this at Mrs. Byers and Bob, hoping that would believe him or all of their lives were at stake.

That's when Will lost it.

"HE'S LYING! HE'S LYING! HE'S LYING!" he shrieked over and over, struggling against his mom and Bob as they held him down.

Loud repetitive pops could be heard just down the hall now, and the sound made Mike's pulse double in rate if that was even possible.

"Those are gunshots!" Bob stated the obvious, but Mrs. Byers was at least thinking clearly. She held her son by the shoulders and shouted to get his attention which he finally stopped yelling and gave her,

"Will! Will! Listen! Do you know who I am? Do you know who I am?"

"You're...", Will hesitated, clearly having to think about it, and continued after a pregnant pause, "you're...mom."

Mike watched all of this transpire and he could see Mrs. Byers' expression become pained as she stared down at the shell of her son. Then, she glanced determinedly at Bob and ordered, "Hold him

down."

"Okay," Bob did as she asked, eliciting another round of screaming from Will,

"NO! LET GO! NO! NO! NO! LET ME GO!"

"I'm sorry! I'm sorry!" Mrs. Byers apologized repeatedly and took the syringe from Mike who watched all of this in horror. He couldn't listen to his friend's screams anymore and he covered his ears with his hands, never taking his eyes off the awful scene.

Mrs. Byers stabbed the needle into her son's arm and almost immediately he fell limp against the bed. They didn't have long to catch their breath or process what they just had to do when the door flew open.

They all looked up and relief flooded Mike to see Hopper and not whatever monster would lead to their demise. Dr. Owens was behind him as well and they both turned at the sound of wood being smashed behind them. High pitched squeals and low growls could be heard closer than Mike felt comfortable with.

"We gotta go, we gotta go," Hopper urged them, reaching forward, yanking the wires monitors off of Will, and lifting him easily up and over his shoulder. They all turned and rushed from the room, Mrs. Byers grabbing the other vials of sedatives on their way out.

Mike jogged along behind Hopper and Bob who led the way, his heart racing, sweat dripping down his back in fear.

All of a sudden, Hopper came to a stop as human screams met their ears, and Mike could just make out the monsters tackling one of the doctors to the ground. There wasn't time to think. They had to run. Hopper made to go down another hall but a soldier with a rifle was shooting at another one of the monsters, so that way was out.

Finally, Hopper led them into a side room, setting Will down on a table near the wall. Someone closed the door swiftly and they were able to get a look at their surroundings.

"Oh my god," Bob breathed, staring up at something. Mike turned to

see what he was looking at and he was certain his blood had froze in his veins at what he saw there.

There was a wall of monitors and on each and every single one was a monster, a Demogorgon. Some were just stalking about but most were ripping someone apart. Their screams had died down, the only sounds left were the low growls of the monsters and the tearing of human flesh.

Then the power flickered and went off entirely, plunging them all into darkness.

"Oh my god," Mrs. Byers whimpered from the back of the room.

The one positive in this situation was that the room they had stumbled upon appeared to be security. Even though the video monitors were down, there were maps of the facility tucked away in a cabinet and with the doctor there to explain where everything was they may actually have a chance of surviving these things and escaping.

"Okay, so this is us, and this is the nearest exit. But even if we somehow make it there, there's no way out," Dr. Owens told Hopper who held a flashlight they had found above the maps. Mike couldn't see exactly where the doctor was pointing, but he knew Hopper and the doctor would get them out of this. They had to. The only person Mike knew had ever managed to kill one of these things was El and it had been the reason she was gone now, so he wasn't hopeful they could take on a whole lab full of them.

"What do you mean?" Hopper asked, confused at why they wouldn't be able to just walk out if they got to the exit.

"The locks are fail secure," Dr. Owens explained.

"Fail secure?" Mrs. Byers asked, from behind them, unsure of what that meant.

"If there's a power outage the building goes on full lock down," Dr. Owens told them, remaining surprisingly calm despite the current circumstances.

"Can it be unlocked remotely?" Bob chimed in.

"With a computer, sure, but somebody's got to reset the breakers," Dr. Owens conceded.

"Where are the breakers?" Hopper asked, determined to do what needed to be done to get them all out of here.

"The breakers are in the basement, three floors down," Dr. Owens said, showing Hopper on the map. The police chief then promptly snatched the map and made to leave the room. But Bob's voice stopped him,

"Hey, where are you going?"

"To reset the breakers," Hopper said as if it were obvious, but Bob wasn't done.

"Okay, then what?"

"Then, we get the hell outta here," Hopper snapped back, annoyed that Bob was holding him up.

"No, then the power comes back on," Bob corrected him, sounding equally annoyed that Hopper was going to charge down there with no plan and no idea of what he was doing. "If you want to unlock the doors you have to reboot the entire computer system and then override the security codes with a manual input."

Even in the dark, Mike could see Hopper beginning to have his doubts. It seemed he hadn't considered all of that. But he was still determined to get them out there. "Fine. How do I do that?"

"You can't! Not unless you know BASIC," Bob said incredulously.

"I don't know what that means," Hopper told him flatly.

"It's a computer programming language," Mike explained, happy to finally be able to contribute.

"All right, teach it to me," Hopper requested, walking back towards them.

"Shall I teach you French while I'm at Jim? How about a little German?" Bob said sarcastically before turning to Dr. Owens and asking him, "How about you Doc? You speak BASIC?"

"No," Dr. Owens admitted.

"Okay, I got this," Bob said more to himself than anyone in particular then glancing up at Hopper, "I got this."

Mrs. Byers stepped towards him shaking her head sadly, "No, Bob."

"It's okay," he reassured her, and she pulled him into a tight hug. "It's gonna be okay. Remember, Bob Newby, superhero."

She gave a humorless laugh, her eyes full of worry and fear. Mike couldn't help but think that it was a long shot that Bob would make it, but it was the best shot they had.

Hopper went out with Bob to help him get a walkie from one of the dead soldiers but came back shortly looking like he had made a terrible mistake letting Bob go on his own.

Now, all there was to do was wait and remain as quiet as possible, hoping the monsters wouldn't find them in here. But they didn't have to wait long.

The lights came back on with a surge of electricity and the monitors flickered to life. After Mike's eyes adjusted he glanced around the room and then up at the screens to see Bob in the basement, alive and well.

"He made it," Mike said in disbelief and little bit of awe. He had really doubted goofy Bob would have it in him to actually get down there and flip the breakers, but he had done it and surprised them all.

With the power back on Dr. Owens was able to get the walkie set up to communicate with Bob.

"Okay, Bob, can you hear us?" Dr. Owens asked into the microphone while watching Bob on the screen above.

"Loud and clear, Doc, can you hear me back?" Bob's voice replied.

"Yeah, we hear you all right," Dr. Owens told him.

"All right, give me a minute," Bob said and they watched him put down the walkie and began typing away on the computer in front of him. It didn't take long before he picked the walkie back up and said, "Open sesame."

A buzzing sounded as the locks clicked open, Dr. Owens turned to them, "It's open."

"Son of a bitch did it," Hopper said proudly, an impressed smile on his face that mirrored how Mike felt.

"All right, I'll meet you outside," Bob told them, getting up to head out, as did all of them in the security room.

"Nice job," Dr. Owens congratulated but then the screeching of one of those monsters and something else must have caught the doctor's eyes, "Hold on a second, Chief."

"What's wrong?" Hopper turned back and asked breathlessly. They were so close now.

"West stairwell's not clear anymore," Dr. Owens informed him pointing him to the monitor, a Demogorgon coming down those stairs.

Bob must have sensed something wasn't right because his voice came through, "What's going on?"

"You got some company," Dr. Owens replied, keeping his voice as calm as possible.

"Where?"

"West stairwell," Dr. Owens replied.

"I got an idea," Bob told him and Mike watched his figure rush back to the computer and begin typing away rapidly.

"What the hell's he doing?" the doctor asked exactly what Mike had been thinking, but it became clear when on another monitor the

sprinklers began spraying a corridor. The Demogorgon must have heard it because he ran in that direction and away from Bob. Mike couldn't believe it. That was pure genius.

"Okay! Okay, that worked. Now get out of there. Go! Go!" Dr. Owens urged him and Bob ran out of the frame of the screen. Without anymore hesitation, Hopper turned and lifted Will into his arms with a grunt of effort. As they turned to leave the doctor stopped them, "Wait a second, Chief."

"What?"

"Take this," Mike watched as the doctor handed over a walkie talkie.

"What're you doing?" Hopper asked breathless and confused.

"If I see any more surprises I'll let you know. Go. Go!" Dr. Owen told him and Hopper took the walkie talkie as well as a machine gun.

Somehow, the police chief was able to carry Will and point the gun at the same time, leading the way as Mike and Mrs. Byers followed him down the seemingly deserted halls. As they neared the outer doors the three of them broke into a run. Mike held the door so Hopper could carry Will out but Mrs. Byers paused turning back to look for Bob.

Hopper handed Will off to him and Mike supported his weight the best he could. But then Mrs. Byers screams pierced the air. Mike's heart pounded in his chest, fear gripping him and making it difficult to breath. Did Will's mom get attacked by one of those things? Hopper ran back into the lab and Mike could hear the rattling off of gunshots. Hopper appeared again, dragging a hysterical Mrs. Byers out of the lab.

"What happened?!" Mike shouted, but he already knew. If Mrs. Byers was still here... a demogorgon had gotten Bob.

"He's gone! He's gone!" Hopper kept repeating to a distraught Joyce, continuing to pull her away from the doors as the demogorgons rammed them repeatedly. They wouldn't hold for much longer.

The roaring of an engine barely registered to Mike's ears over the

screeching din of the monsters, but then a car squealed to a stop in front of them, the headlights cutting the darkness. It was Jonathan's car.

"C'mon! Get in!" Jonathan yelled at them and Hopper hauled Will up and into the vehicle while Mike and Mrs. Byers crammed in as well.

Jonathan told them in a rush that the others were near the entrance gate, so he dropped Hopper off at his truck. They sped to the gate, Hopper paused to pick up the rest of them, and they all raced back to Mrs. Byers house. Mike sat in the back with Will propping him up against the window, his mind completely blank from the shock of losing Bob. The only noise that broke the silence was the sound of Mrs. Byers sobs.

When they got back to Will's house Bob's car was still parked outside and it was a harsh reminder of the man who had just died to save them all. Hopper laid Will down on the couch, Jonathan and Nancy went to sit with him because Mrs. Byers had locked herself away in her room, too distraught to think clearly about their next steps right now. Hopper got on the phone almost immediately while the rest of them just sat around the kitchen table and listened.

"I just feel like you're not getting the urgency of the situation. The name? Sam Owens. Dr. Sam Owens. I don't know how many people are there! I don't know how many people are left alive. I am the police! Chief Jim Hopper. Yes, the number that I gave you. 6767, I will be here," Hopper yelled into the phone before slamming it back on the cradle.

"They didn't believe you, did they?" Dustin asked and got a sharp look from the older man.

"We'll see," Hopper said flatly.

"We'll see?! We can't just sit here while those things are loose!" Mike roared at him. He was pissed. They had to do something and here they were just sitting ducks, not to mention those things could be all over the place by now terrorizing Hawkins.

"We stay here, and we wait for help," Hopper told him with finality,

effectively ending the conversation by walking away. Mike just stared at his retreating back in frustration.

They all just continued to sit in silence. Mike didn't know what to do. On one hand, Hopper was telling them they needed to just wait, and other Mike's instincts were telling him that they had to do something. He glanced again at the telephone trying to will it to ring but no such luck. His eyes drifted for a moment and landed on the pile of puzzle games Bob had brought for Will when he thought he was just sick. Mike stood up and strode over there, picking up the puzzle cube. Bob had been a lot of the things but he was a good guy who was brave and had saved them. They couldn't let him die in vain.

"Did you guys know that Bob was the original founder of Hawkins AV?" Mike asked no one in particular.

"Really?" Lucas said in disbelief so Mike turned to them. This was how he could rally the troops, so to speak.

"He petitioned the school to start it and everything. And he had a fundraiser for equipment. Mr. Clarke learned everything from him. Pretty awesome, right?" Mike said, walking back towards them with the puzzle. Mr. Clarke had filled him on all of this one day after class and it had given Mike a greater appreciation for the goofy guy who hung around the Byers' house.

"Yeah," Dustin and Lucas agreed.

"We can't let him die in vain," Mike asserted putting the puzzle on the table. Dustin's reaction was strong and immediate,

"What do you want to do, Mike? The Chief's right on this. We can't stop those Demo-dogs on our own."

"Demo-dogs?" Max asked doubtfully, giving Dustin a sideways glance.

"Demogorgon... Dogs...Demo-dogs, it's like a compound," Dustin explained unnecessarily. "It's like a play on words, you know."

"Okay," Max snapped back silencing Dustin, but not for long.

"I mean, when it was just Dart, maybe," he conceded.

"But there's an army now," Lucas reminded them.

"Precisely."

"His army," Mike said quietly, his brain putting the pieces together as he spoke.

"What do you mean?" Steve asked from his spot leaning against the cabinets in the kitchen.

"His army," Mike repeated more confidently. "Maybe if we stop him then we stop his army too."

Mike strode purposefully away from them and into Will's room where the drawing of the shadow monster sat where they had left it, the others having followed him in there.

"The shadow monster," Dustin said in understanding.

"It got Will that day in the field," Mike explained, his heart beginning to race as the ideas formulated in his head. "The doctor said it was like a virus, it infected him."

"And so, this virus, it's connecting him to the tunnels," Max questioned, looking for clarification.

"To the tunnels, to the monsters, to the Upside Down, everything," Mike answered, getting more excited as they neared the solution, but Steve wasn't getting it,

"Whoa, slow down, slow down."

"Okay, so the shadow monster's inside of everything, and the vines feel something like pain, and so does Will," Mike expanded on his theory.

"And so does Dart," Lucas added.

"Yeah, it's like what Mr. Clarke taught us, the hive mind," Mike deduced.

"Hive mind?" Steve asked, still not following.

"A collective consciousness. It's a super organism," Dustin defined.

"This is the thing that controls everything. It's the brain," Mike told them, looking at each of them to see if they were following.

"Like the Mind Flayer," Dustin concluded, and Lucas snapped his fingers at him in understanding. Mike couldn't have thought of a better comparison.

A collective "What?" sounded from the non-D&D players, Max and Steve, so Dustin found Will's manual and pulled it out to help illustrate the point. They also gathered the others to hear the theory.

"The Mind Flayer," Dustin began but Hopper quickly interrupted.

"What the hell is that?"

"It's a monster from an unknown dimension. It's so ancient that it doesn't even know its true home. Okay, so it enslaves races of other dimensions by taking over their brains using its highly developed psionic powers," Dustin explained to them as they all crowded around the kitchen table.

However, Hopper wasn't buying what they were selling, growling in annoyance, "My god, none of this is real. This is a kids' game."

"No, it's a manual and it's not for kids, and unless you know something that we don't this is the best metaphor-," Dustin argued back only to have Lucas cut in,

"Analogy."

Dustin looked at him disbelief for a second before launching into his tirade once more, "Analogy? That's what you're worried about? Fine! *Analogy* for understanding what this it."

"Okay, so this Mind Flamer thing-," Nancy began, clearly trying to understand but Dustin corrected her quickly,

"Flayer. Mind Flayer."

Nancy sighed and gave him a sideways glance, "What does it want?"

"To conquer us, basically, it believes it's the master race," Dustin continued but now, Steve felt the need to contribute.

"Like the Germans," Steve stammered.

"Uh, the Nazis," Dustin corrected with annoyance.

"Yeah, yeah, the Nazis," Steve agreed, not understanding the distinction.

"Uh, if the Nazis were from another dimension, then totally. It views other races like us as inferior to itself," Dustin explained. Mike could see Hopper in the back ground rubbing his face in exasperation; he felt this was a waste of time clearly, which only made Mike angrier, so he elaborated anyway,

"It wants to spread and take over other dimensions."

"We are talking about the destruction of our world as we know it," Lucas predicted the worst case scenario.

"That's great, that's great, that's really great!" Steve exclaimed, unable to handle the information, so he walked away from the table for a moment. Nancy, on the hand, seemed to be on board because she picked up the manual to look at it more closely, verbally processing,

"Uh- Okay so if this is thing is like a brain and its controlling everything, then if we kill it..."

"We kill everything it controls," Mike finished her thought for her, glad his big sister was at least trying to understand.

"We win," Lucas concluded.

"Theoretically," Dustin reminded them all.

"All right, great, so how do you kill this thing? You shoot it with fire balls or something," Hopper asked, rejoining the conversation and taking the book from Nancy.

"No, no, no fireballs. You summon an undead army because zombies they don't have brains and the Mind Flayer it likes brains. It's just a

game," Dustin stammered, realizing how ridiculous it sounded as Hopper stared him down.

"What the hell are we doing here?" Hopper growled, slamming the book shut and throwing it down on the table. He walked away again in anger.

"I thought we were waiting for your military backup," Dustin replied, defensively.

"We are!" Hopper roared back, turning to look at them. Mike wasn't going to be deterred by the older man.

"But even if they come, how are they going stop this? You can't just shoot this with guns," Mike thundered right back at him fiercely. He was so tired of Hopper just charging into everything guns blazing and not using his brain. They had used D&D as an analogy last year and it helped them find Will was it really out of the realm of possibility it could help them again?

"You don't know that! We don't know anything," Hopper debated hotly.

"We know that it's already killed everybody in that lab!" Mike shot back.

"And we know the monsters are gonna molt again," Lucas added.

"And we know that's it's only a matter of time before the tunnels reach this town," Dustin concluded as well.

"They're right," the weak voice of Mrs. Byers made all of them look over to her. "We have to kill it. I want to kill it."

Mike thought Mrs. Byers really didn't look so good. She still wore the rumpled scrubs from the lab and her eyes were red-rimmed from tears, not to mention the dark circles from lack of sleep.

"Me too, me too, Joyce, okay? But how do we do that? We don't exactly know what we're dealing with here," Hopper tried to reason, speaking to her much softer than he had to any of them.

"No, but he does. If anyone knows how to destroy this thing, it's Will. He's connected to him. He'll know its weakness," Mike explained his theory, walking towards where Will lay unconscious on the couch.

"I thought we couldn't trust him anymore. That he's a spy for the Mind Flayer now," Max questioned.

"Yeah, but he can't spy if he doesn't know where he is," Mike said, figuring it out as he spoke. Mrs. Byers had convinced Hopper when none of them good, so the police chief finally agreed. They formulated a plan and put it into action quickly.

Mike led Hopper out into the shed and he said, finally on board with the plan, "Yeah, this'll work."

Hopper got to work on clearing out the shed, Nancy and Steve covered the walls in tarps, while Dustin and Lucas searched through the trash for newspapers to cover the walls as well.

Then all had a job and it reminded Mike of last year when they all got the "bath" ready for El to use her powers and find Will in the Upside Down. Thinking of her caused a sharp pain to stab in his chest. He had been fairly distracted trying to survive the demo-dogs that he hadn't had a chance to think of her, but now she had returned to the surface. Max didn't help matters either.

"I get why El was your mage now," Max told him from her spot behind him. Mike's head was under the sink, but his eyes shot over to her in confusion and annoyance.

"What?" Mike barked. He really didn't want to have this conversation, and especially not with Max and especially not now when all of their lives were in danger.

"Lucas. He told me all about her," Max explained as she broke off pieces of tape to use to hang up cardboard and newspaper on the shed walls.

Mike hated the casual way she just brought up El as if she had any right to even know about her much less speak her name.

"Yeah, well, he shouldn't have," Mike growled back at her, "and just

because you know the truth doesn't mean you're in our party, you do know that right?"

Mike knew he was being harsh in his hurt and anger, but this didn't change anything. It wasn't Lucas' place to talk about El to a practical stranger. If El was out there it could put her in danger and Lucas hadn't even wanted El in their party to begin with, so he had no business talking about her at all.

"Yeah, I know," Max replied quickly, averting her eyes from him. Then, she had self-deprecatingly, "I mean, why would you want a stupid zoomer in your party anyway?"

He continued on with his task finding the ammonia to wake Will up, feeling only slightly guilty at being so mean to her, but her next words caught him a little off guard.

"I'm just saying. El, she sounds like she was really awesome," Max said sincerely.

Mike paused for only a second, considering that. 'Awesome' didn't even come close to describing El, it wasn't even the tip of the iceberg. She was so many things and 'awesome' was just one in a list of adjectives he could use to describe her, but he couldn't do this right now.

"Yeah, she was...", Mike agreed shortly, shutting the cabinet as he felt his heart being crushed by the mere mention of her name. That pain quickly transformed into rage towards the Demogorgons, as he continued, "-until that thing took her. Just like it took Bob."

Mike gave her a withering look and then stood up and walked away quickly. He didn't know where that had come from. Why had he compared El to Bob? That was the first time he had even entertained the idea that maybe El was dead. Why now?

He had to push these thoughts away because it was time for them to gather in the shed and get the Mind Flayer out of Will.

"All right, you ready?" Hopper asked Mrs. Byers and she turned to look at him.

"Yeah," Mrs. Byers didn't seem confident in her answer but they all knew this had to be done to save their friend and themselves, maybe even the world.

Hopper approached Will, where they had tied him to a chair and poured ammonia on a rag, holding it beneath his nose until the chemical woke him up. Will blinked several times against the bright light they had placed in there, his eyes then going wide as he struggled against his bindings.

"What is this?" Will asked with urgency in his voice as he stared wildly around at them. "What is this? Why am I tied up?"

His mom was the first to try and talk to him. She knelt down in front of him and assured her son, if he was still in there, "Will, we just want to talk to you. We're not gonna hurt you."

Will looked at her for only a moment before ignoring her reassurances and looking around the room, "Where am I?"

"Recognize this?" Hopper asked firmly, bending down in front of Will as well to show him the picture of the shadow monster that Will himself had made. "Do you recognize this?"

"No," Will shook his head. Mike knew that if it was really Will then he would remember that picture. That thing had been haunting him, and Mike would never forget the look of fear that had come over his face when they talked about it on Halloween.

"Hey, we want to help you, but we need to understand how to kill it," Mrs. Byers explained gently to Will, but she didn't realize that she wasn't talking to Will right now.

"Why am I tied up?" Will shouted in her face, his voice only getting louder and more insistent. "WHY AM I TIED UP?! LET ME GO! LET ME GO!"

Mike watched in horror as one of his best friends began to thrash around in the chair, flailing his head wildly to free himself. Hopper had to hold his upper body to keep him from hurting himself. The lights began to flicker and then Will's voice began to change; it

became deeper and not his own. For a moment, Mike thought they were too late and that the Mind Flayer had already taken over his friend, an overwhelming feeling of grief smothering him.

"LET ME GO! LET ME GO!" Will continued to scream but eventually he seemed to have spent all his energy because his eyes went wide and his words became slower as Will struggled to breathe around the effort. "Let me go.... Let me go."

As Will sat there panting, looking even more pale, Mrs. Byers sat across from him, leaning close to speak quietly to him, "Do you know what March 22nd is?"

Will's face remained unchanged as she continued unfazed, "It's your birthday. *Your* birthday. When you turned eight I got you that huge box of crayons. Do you remember that? It was 120 colors. And all your friends they got you Star Wars toys but all you wanted to do was draw with all your new colors. And you drew this spaceship, but it wasn't from a movie, it was your spaceship. A rainbow ship is what you called it. And you must have used every color in the box. I took it with me to Melvald's and I told everyone who came in, 'my son drew this.' And you were so embarrassed, but I was so proud. I was so, so proud."

During her story Will's had stared at her with rapt attention, his face a flat mask revealing no emotion or recognition, but his eyes, his eyes were Will's eyes again.

"Do you remember the day dad left?" Jonathan spoke up from behind his mom, breathing shakily as he began his own memory. Will's eyes slid over to him and followed as Jonathan came to crouch at eyelevel with his brother. "We stayed up all night building Castle Byers, just the way you drew it. And it took so long because you were so bad at hammering. You missed the nail every time. And then it started raining but we stayed out there anyway. We were sick for like a week after that, but we just had to finish it, didn't we? We just had to."

The darkness in Mike was started to lift because it really seemed like they were getting through to him, so he was emboldened to tell his favorite story of their friendship.

"Do you remember the first day we met?" Mike began, tears already dripping down his cheeks as Will glanced over to him. "It was- it was the first day of kindergarten. I knew nobody. I had no friends... and I just felt so alone and so scared."

While he spoke Mike couldn't seem to find the courage to look Will in the eye. Maybe it was because he was afraid his friend really was gone and he wouldn't remember the most important memory Mike had of them as friends. Or maybe because he was terrified he was going to lose another person to these monsters. But halfway through, he was able to glance up through his sniffing to see his friend's eyes held just an ounce of recognition, so he kept speaking, "but I saw you on the swings and you were alone too. You were just swinging by yourself, and I just walked up to you and I asked, I asked if you wanted to be my friend. And you said yes, you said yes."

Will's breathing was just as erratic as all of theirs and Mike knew that he had gotten through somehow, and he finished, "It's the best thing I've ever done."

If Mike didn't know any better he'd think that Will was on the verge of tears, but he just hoped it wasn't the Mind Flayer playing with their emotions.

"Will, baby, if you're in there just please, please talk to us. Can you do that for me, honey?" Mrs. Byers pleaded with him. "Please, I love you so much."

Will's face really looked on the verge of crumpling into tears and Mike thought he was going to be able to tell them out to defeat the Mind Flayer, but then they could all see the change again. The creases of emotion on Will's face smoothed and his eyes glossed over as he spoke flatly, "Let me go."

The feeling of utter defeat permeated the room. They had just poured their heart and souls and it had gotten them nowhere. Mike sniffled, trying to collect himself to figure out what to do next when Hopper ushered them all outside and back into the house. Mike followed along with everybody else, confused but anxious to hear what the chief had figured out and willing to hold onto any glimmer of hope whatsoever at this point.

Hopper sat down at the kitchen table with an empty envelope and a pen, explaining, "I think he's talking, just not with words." He drew a series of dots and dashes as they all craned their necks over his shoulder to see what was happening.

"Wait, what is that?" Steve asked.

"Morse code," every answered in unison.

"H-E-R-E," Hopper spelled out.

"Here," Mike read, his mind slowly coming to a realization.

"Will's still in there. He's talking to us," Hopper concluded, looking up at them. Hope filled them all again that their friend wasn't gone.

They all sprang into action. Jonathan grabbed his radio, and they split back up, with Mike, Mrs. Byers, Hopper, and Jonathan heading back out to Will in the shed. The tactic was simple: keep telling Will their happiest memories of him in the hopes that he would stay with them enough to tap out the answer to defeating the Mind Flayer. The others stayed inside with a walkie talkie, so while Will tapped, Hopper mirrored his taps on the walkie talkie behind his back. Jonathan put a tap in the radio, blaring that weird song he liked.

"Do you remember the first time I played you this?" Jonathan started, "Mom and Dad were both arguing the next room. So, I played you the mix tape I made you. And it was the first time you got into music. Real music."

Mike was up next thinking of one of the many memorable D&D campaigns where Will was the hero. Eventually Mike concluded his tale, "And then the party escaped into the sewers and there were those big insect things, and you guys were still on level one. Then you cast Fog Cloud and saved us. You saved the whole party."

Mrs. Byers sat down in the chair across from Will next and spoke softly, "You saw that little girl and she was in the sandbox and she was crying. You gave her your Tonka Truck and I told you we couldn't afford to buy another one. You said she should have it because she's sad. 'She's sad mommy.' I love you so much, so, so

much."

As the song ended, in the silence they heard the piercing sound of the phone ringing inside the house. Will's eyes snapped to it and they all held their breaths to see if he knew where he was, but almost immediately Will's eyes rolled back into his head and moved under his eyelids.

"Hey, hey, can you hear me?" Mrs. Byers asked, leaning forward from the chair towards her son, but it was no longer her son.

Will's head was jerking side to side and he was breathing heavily. Hopper leaned forward and said what they had been dreading but already knew, "It knows, it knows where we are."

"Oh, shit," Mrs. Byers said underneath her breath, spinning to grab a syringe and turned back to Will, quickly injecting the sedative into his upper arm. Instantly, Will went limp against his restraints but it was too late.

Mike followed Hopper and Jonathan outside of the shed, only to hear the distant, but unmistakable shriek of the demo-dogs. Mike's heart plummeted into his stomach. Rushing back inside, Jonathan exclaimed, "They're coming!"

"What?" Mrs. Byers said instinctively, but she knew what they were talking about. Mike hurried to help Jonathan untie the ropes around Will, his fingers fumbling in his fear. They had to get him inside and quick or they'd all be dead.

"We gotta go," Hopper urged, "C'mon, let's go!"

They didn't need to be told twice. Jonathan heaved Will up onto his shoulder and they all ran for the house, Hopper bringing up the rear. As soon as Mike got into the house he joined Max and Lucas at the front window to see if they could spot the monsters approaching.

"Hey! Get away from the windows!" Hopper yelled at them and they did as they were told. Hopper then turned to Jonathan holding out the old hunting rifle, "Do you know how to use this?"

"What?" Jonathan replied lamely

"Can you use this?" Hopper repeated more insistently, but it was Nancy who spoke up, telling him confidently,

"I can."

She stepped up and he tossed it to her. Mike was surprised to see that she knew how to handle it. If they survived the night he'd make a note to ask her about that.

They all gathered in a tight group in the middle of the living room the adults and teenagers in the front with various weapons, Nancy with the rifle, Hopper with the machine gun, and Steve with the bat with all the nails in it. Even Lucas had the wrist rocket out and at the ready.

"Where are they?" Max asked from the back of the room, Lucas standing protectively in front of her. Mike felt completely helpless. He had no way of defending himself or really any hope they would make it out of this alive. But regardless, he grabbed one of their science fair trophies and held it up, ready to fight these bastards to the death. He wanted so badly to kill one of the things that had taken El away from him, killed Bob, and were part of the thing possessing Will.

The growling started low and then grew louder as they neared, but then there was sudden loud thudding near the door and the rustle of the bushes outside.

"What're they doing?" Nancy asked, pointing the rifle straight at location of the sound. There was more snarling, but then a different noise.

It almost sounded like a cry of pain. More screeching and groaning but also loud bangs continued to sound all around the front of the house. None of them could see anything through the front windows but the leaves moving on the hedges got their attention.

The noise stopped abruptly. They all just stayed in place, hearts racing in terror, their breaths coming in short gasps.

A crash made them all jump as one of the demo-dogs was pelted

through the front window. It slid the short distance across the living room and came to rest against a side table unmoving.

"Holy shit," Dustin swore as they all hesitantly approached the creature's body, its teeth still gleaming in the low light.

"Is it dead?" Max asked, her voice low. In response, Hopper gave its grotesque head a shove with the tip of his boot. From where Mike was it looked like it's neck must be broken, the way it flopped over like that, lifeless.

In the silence, the sound of the door creaking startled them all back to their positions, weapons raised in self-defense. The dead bolt flung upwards. The chain slid over and out of the track on its own.

Mike's fear-addled brain wasn't thinking clearly but he only knew of one way that was possible...

The door slowly creaked open, a figure stepping forward, their appearance gradually coming into view.

Mike's brain wasn't able to fully process the information his eyes were receiving.

Converse shoes... faded jeans rolled up at the ankles...black blazer...

All of the air had been sucked out of the room. Mike couldn't breathe as his eyes took in more familiar characteristics of the new arrival his feet propelling him forward of their own accord, as if he was being pulled towards this person like a magnet.

Dark hair... pink lips...bloody nose...chocolate brown eyes...

It was *her*.

It was El.

A/N: Whew... so a lot happened this chapter, mostly action. But you best believe next chapter is where it all happens. I'm definitely going to be splitting up the next episode into two chapters. One for the bulk of the action at the end and then an

epilogue which maybe equally long (or longer) that fills in the gap before ending on the Snow Ball. I really can't wait for you guys to read it because I'm super stoked about it. Just like in the show, all of that waiting and them pining for each other will have been worth it. Please let me know what you think and I am formulating my own season three as I finish this one up, so any and all ideas are welcome. Thank you guys for the support and as I've said before, reviews are writer fuel. PURE FUEL!

9. Chapter 9: The Gate

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CHAPTER 9: THE GATE

It had been a long night, but El wasn't tired. She'd been able to get a little bit of sleep on the bus back to Hawkins but her worry for Mike and Hopper and her friends kept her awake for most of the ride. As the bus neared its destination, El shut her eyes tight and searched Mike out with her mind.

Her eyes flew open and she was in her mind visit. A short distance away she could make out Mike's figure knelt down on the ground and El's heart began to pound in her chest as it often did whenever she laid eyes on the dark-haired boy. He looked as though he were searching for something in a low cabinet. El couldn't see anything around him as she slowly approached, her shoes slapping against the wet ground.

Then all of a sudden Mike turned to look at something behind him, and he snapped, "What?"

It took El so off guard that her feet faltered mere steps from Mike and she almost tripped into him, but she was able to steady herself.

She had no idea who Mike had directed that to but he obviously wasn't happy with them. Watching as Mike turned back to whatever he was looking for, El gradually lowered herself down beside him.

"Yeah, well, he shouldn't have," Mike growled back at whoever, adding, "and just because you know the truth doesn't mean you're in our party, you do know that right?"

Confusion filled El as she stared at Mike, his body radiating frustration and anger and sadness. Who did he not want in the party? And why? And what shouldn't they have done? El wanted so badly to reach out and touch him, but she didn't want him to disappear, so she used every ounce of self-control to remain where she was.

She watched him intently as he continued on with his task eventually pulling out a jug of something she didn't recognize. The bottle spelled, A-M-M-O-N-I-A, but she didn't know what that was. After a short pause, Mike seemed to tilt his head slightly as if listening to the person behind him speak again. She sensed his anger leave him, but only for a moment.

Mike leaned back and shut the cabinet he had been searching in and replied without looking back at the person, "Yeah, she was." Then the pain came back and he continued, "until that thing took her. Just like it took Bob."

Something inside El felt like it was being squeezed tightly, making it difficult to breath. She didn't know who Bob was, but she had a sneaking suspicion the 'her' Mike was referring to was herself.

She didn't have time to dwell on it because Mike stood abruptly and walked away from her and whoever he had been speaking to.

El's eyelids flew open as the bus came to a stop and she knew exactly where she needed to go. Running on pure adrenaline now, El hurried down the aisle, past the few passengers still left and bolted off the bus. The Byers' house was going to be quite a walk, but she'd made it this far.

Walking as fast as she could without actually running, El sped off into the darkness heading towards Mike.

So, many thoughts were running through her head and there wasn't much to distract her this late at night in Hawkins as she walked. She thought about how mad Hopper would be at her for running away, she thought about what her friends' reactions would be when they saw her again, but mostly she thought about Mike.

She knew he wasn't hurt and some of the danger must have passed based on her mind visit with him earlier, but she could feel anxiety and tension in his whole demeanor. Whatever was going on wasn't over and she needed to get to him.

What would *his* reaction be to seeing her again after all this time? Would he be happy? Would he be mad that she had been around this whole time, watching him in her mind visits?

A ear piercing, inhuman screech cut through the air, causing as cold chill to run up her spine.

El knew that sound: the monster.

But the sound continued and then there were multiple, overlapping each other. Her heart stopped because she came to the realization... there was more than one, not only that but there were many, many of them.

She froze in place and strained her ears to listen. Their calls were getting more faint. They were headed where she was headed: the Byers' house.

Without thinking, El broke into a sprint. She didn't even need to have a mind visit with Mike to feel his heart pounding in her own chest, his breathing, like hers, erratic.

El pushed herself even further and soon the trees began to thin out, the house becoming visible. The monsters were all around the house, their low growls the only sound giving them away. El slowed to a walk, taking deep, calming breaths, and preparing herself for the fight. She was stronger now. She could do this to save Mike and her friends.

One by one the monsters realized they were not alone out there, turning their grotesque heads in her direction. It was strange, they knew she was there, but they seemed reluctant to attack her, instead focused on the people in the house.

But then one broke ranks and galloped towards her, snarling hungrily.

Lifting her hand quickly, El threw it against a tree, hearing the crunch of its spine. Seeing their fallen comrade, the others now turned to attack her. But they were no match for her or her determination to keep the people she cared about safe. One by one they charged, and one by one she dispatched them as easily as the first.

Then there were none.

El could feel the tell-tale tickle on her upper lip, notifying her of a bloody nose and the feeling of exhaustion creeping in, but her need to see Mike and make sure he was okay outweighed that.

Stepping forward, El was almost to the door when out of the corner of her eye she saw a flash of movement. She didn't have time to think. She flung her arm out and instinctually shot the monster back and through the front window of the house, the sound of glass shattering filling the quiet.

Panting, El stood still for a few seconds, her eyes shooting all around her to see if there were any other stragglers wanting to take her by surprise, but there were none. El took a deep inhale and faced the door once more. Using her powers, she flipped the dead bolt and then slid the chain off the track.

The anticipation of seeing Mike again was killing her. She *needed* to see him.

She used her powers once more to push open the door. She took another calming breath and stepped through slowly.

Her eyes found his dark ones immediately.

El couldn't breathe, she couldn't think; all she knew was Mike was here with her and she felt whole again, like she was home.

Mike just stared at the girl in front of him. Was this real? Or was this just another one his countless delusions of her? But no... she looked different. Good different, pretty different, but definitely different. Her hair was longer, her clothes were different, she was wearing dark eye makeup. There was no mistaking those piercing mahogany eyes though. It was definitely El.

There was no one else in the room. Only her.

Mike was only marginally aware of a watery smile forming on his face as his feet propelled him forward. She was smiling at him too, her lips parted slightly as if she was having just as hard a time as him trying to breathe.

Somehow, he had ended up mere inches from her, but he still wasn't close enough.

"Eleven," he heard himself say, but he hadn't consciously spoken.

"Mike," she breathed back and the sound of her voice saying his name made the reality of the situation finally hit him. El is alive. El is here.

They fell into each other's arms and the tears of relief flowed freely down his cheeks unashamedly. Even through his hoodie he could feel her hands snake underneath his arms, clutching his upper back, holding him tightly to her. But Mike had no intention of going anywhere. He held her just as securely to his chest, squeezing her as hard as he dared without hurting her.

Burying his head in her shoulder, Mike tried to memorize every detail of this moment, in case it really was a cruel trick of his mind. It seemed so real though.

He could hear her gasping for air, her cheek warm against his neck. He couldn't take it anymore. He needed to say something to her, for her to say something back so he knew this was all really happening.

Pulling back suddenly, Mike didn't release his hold on her, just slid his hands to her upper arms. She was so close, her hands clung to his side, holding him at arm's length. Her soft brown eyes were full of tears as well and Mike had the urge to wipe them away but then he'd have to let go of her and he wasn't ready to do that.

"I never gave up on you," Mike could barely form the words through his tears, but he needed her to know. "I called you every night, *every night* for-

"353 days," her soft voice finished for him and Mike just stared at her in confusion. How-? She answered his question without being asked. "I heard," she told him earnestly with a slight shake of her head.

His mind was having difficulty processing this new information alongside all of the emotions swirling around in his chest. But he pieced together that she must have been able to find him like she found Will and listened to his calls to her every night, well

everything up until a few days ago.

"Why didn't you tell me you were there? That you were okay?" Mike asked, searching her expressive eyes for answers. He was certain she had a good reason, but that didn't stop the slight twinge of hurt that stabbed his heart.

"Because I wouldn't let her," the sound of Hopper's voice behind him startled Mike a little because he had completely forgotten that he and El weren't the only two people in the room. Mike released El enough to turn to look at the police chief in confusion. What did Hopper have to do with all this? What did he mean, he wouldn't let her?

Mike just stared at the older man in utter disbelief, the pieces falling into place. He stepped back slightly as Hopper approached her, giving them just enough space.

"What the hell is this? Where have you been?" Hopper asked her sternly to which she shot back,

"Where have *you* been?"

Despite this gruff exchange, Hopper pulled El into a one-armed hug which she returned without a fight. Mike had finally gotten it. What Hopper meant and why they were hugging as if father and daughter.

White hot rage began to blaze in his chest at the complete and utter betrayal; not by El, but this man who proclaimed to be trying to keep them all safe. The man who had probably betrayed them all once already last year when the bad men just magically knew El was hiding with them in the school gym.

"You've been hiding her! You've been hiding her this whole time," Mike didn't think he had ever been this angry in his entire life. He shoved the much bigger man in the back, really wanting to punch him in the face, but Hopper grabbed him roughly.

"Hey, hey! Let's talk alone," he growled threateningly, but Mike could barely hear him as the man released him with a shove towards the hall. As much as Mike was loathe to be anywhere that wasn't with El right now, he acquiesced, stomping towards Will's room, the chief on

his heels.

El watched Hopper follow behind a seething Mike apprehensively. She debated whether she should intervene. Hopper wouldn't hurt Mike, at least she didn't think he would, but she'd know with her powers if he did.

Her mind and body were still reeling after her reunion with the dark-haired boy. They had hugged before and Mike had even kissed her last year, but the embrace they had just shared made all of that pale in comparison.

This time around she made sure to memorize every detail of the moment. As long as she lived she was certain she'd never forget the feeling of his warm arms wrapped around her, holding her body close to his. His heart pounding against her own in her chest was not something she'd ever get from a mind visit. This was real.

After being apart for 357 days, it was like she had been underwater that whole time, drowning, and then Mike looked at her with his warm, dark eyes and she could finally breath again.

She understood why he was hurt and mad that no one had told him that she was alive this whole time. Mike was so, so angry but she knew it wasn't directed at her, but she hated being the cause of any of his pain, intentionally or not.

Walking down the hall, Hopper started speaking before they even were in Mrs. Byers' room.

"I didn't let her tell you because I was protecting her," the older man began to explain calmly which only made Mike even more furious with him. Did Hopper even realize the agony he had put Mike through this past year? Did he even care?

Mike rounded on him ready to tear into the bigger man even before the door was closed.

"Protecting her? Protecting her?" he roared incredulously. What? Did

Hopper think that Mike wouldn't protect her? That he hadn't been protecting her that whole time by hiding her in his basement?

"Listen. Listen to me, the more people that know about her, the more danger she's in, the more danger you and your family are in," Hopper reasoned, closing the door behind him and setting the gun down in the corner before facing Mike.

"So, what? I should be thanking you, then," Mike shouted. That explanation wasn't good enough. Not by a long shot.

"I'm not asking you to thank me!" Hopper raised his voice but then seemed like he was trying to stay calm so he continued more evenly, "I'm asking you to try and understand."

"I don't! I don't understand!" Mike continued to shout. He didn't care if this asshole was chief of police, he'd still break his nose for breaking his heart by making him think El was gone.

"Well, that's fine! Just don't blame her! All right? She's upset enough as it is," Hopper argued right back, but he didn't get it.

"I don't blame her! I blame you! I blame you!" Mike's rage was reaching a tipping point. This amount of anger wasn't sustainable. It was only a matter time before it boiled over.

"That's okay, kid. That's okay," Hopper said snidely, not offering any challenge.

"No! Nothing about this is okay! NOTHING ABOUT THIS IS OKAY!" Mike screamed at him, seeing red. In a totally uncharacteristic move, Mike punched the much larger man as hard as he could right in the gut. But he didn't just stop there. No, something in Mike had snapped. He wanted to hit this man for every day he had to live thinking El was gone, every call he made to her that was left unanswered, every second of every day that he had to exist without her in it because of him.

"YOU STUPID, DISGUSTING LIAR, PIECE OF SHIT!" Mike screamed, punching the man over and over again, but Hopper offered no defense, allowing himself to be backed into the door.

"LIAR! LIAR! LIAR!"

"It's okay, kid! Stop it! It's okay," Hopper repeated, his hands hovering over Mike's shoulders as Mike continued to pummel him until Mike broke. His screams died down as the fight left him. He no longer had any anger left in him and all that remained was pain.

"You're okay, kid," Hopper said softly, holding Mike in a tight hug as he broke down in sobs. "I'm sorry, kid."

Her friends wouldn't let her dwell on her feelings though because they were just as anxious to have their reunion with her as well.

"We missed you," Lucas said sincerely, while he and Dustin pulled her into a tight hug.

"I missed you too," El told them, holding each of them in either arm.

"We talked about you pretty much every day," she heard Dustin say in her left ear and then pulled away from the friendly embrace to look at them. She was still worried about Mike, so she knew her expression probably made it seem like she wasn't as happy to see them as they were to see her.

Dustin smiled her and the gleam of something in his mouth caught her eye. In confusion El raised her hand to his mouth, pressing her thumb to the shiny white teeth there.

"Teeth," she said simply, still trying to figure out how they had gotten there. Last year, Dustin had been missing his front teeth and spoke with a heavy lisp. His smile faltered a bit and he leant back to escape her prodding of his mouth.

"What?"

"You have teeth," El expanded, seeing that Dustin didn't understand her confusion. At her words, he smiled knowingly over at Lucas who returned it, but El just stared waiting for a response.

"Oh, you like these pearls?" he asked and then made a weird purring sound like a cat, taking El off guard. She didn't have time to ask him

about his strange behavior before another, more unwelcome person was calling her name.

"Eleven?" the red headed girl said from behind the boys, approaching with a friendly but nervous smile. "Hey, um- I'm Max, I've heard a lot about you."

The girl named Max, the girl who had smiled at Mike and Mike smiled back at, held out her hand for El to shake. She stared at it for just a moment before purposefully stepping around her, making sure to brush her shoulder on the way.

Instead, El went straight for Mrs. Byers, the woman who had been closer to a mother last year than she had ever had. She fell right into the older woman's arms and reveled in the feeling of being held by an adult who genuinely cared about her.

"Hey, hey, sweetheart," Mrs. Byers breathed and El clutched her tightly before the older woman leaned back and took her face in her hands. El was almost the same height as her now, so she could see the warmth in her eyes easily. She gave her a watery smile, moving her hand to El's shoulders. "Hey."

Mrs. Byers seemed so happy and relieved to see her and it made El feel happy to know someone cared about her the way Mrs. Byers did. As much as she wanted to catch up with all of her friends or go back to Mike, there were more pressing things to take care of at the moment.

El stared right back at Mrs. Byers tired face, lines of worry creasing her forehead and asked, "Can I see him?"

Mrs. Byers nodded slightly leading her down the hall and to the boys' room. She waited at the door as El stepped in, the older woman following close behind. El's eyes immediately landed on Will laying completely still on the bed and she came to sit beside him.

"He-he's not doing well," Mrs. Byers told her, stumbling on her words in her worry over her son's well-being.

"I know," El told her, placing a gentle hand on Will's shoulder before

clarifying, "I saw."

El could feel Mrs. Byers' eyes on her, staring intently, the question on her lips, "What else did you see?"

Eventually, El got the nerve to glance over at Mrs. Byers, but she didn't answer her. It wasn't something she could really put into words. She had been able to feel Mike and his worry for the younger boy, but she had also seen the monsters and how they were controlled by the bigger monster inside Will now.

Mrs. Byers placed a hand on her shoulder and glanced towards the door, insinuating that there was something she wanted to show her. So, with one last sad look at Will, El stood and followed Mrs. Byers out of the room and into the kitchen.

There on the table was what looked like the back of a notepad, the words written, 'CLOSE GATE.' She didn't need to read that to know that's what needed to happen. It was only a matter of time when her grave mistake of opening the gate last year would lead to something catastrophic. Now, it had put all of her friends in danger and Will may even die if she didn't save them.

"You opened this gate before, right?" Mrs. Byers voice cut into her thoughts. She could feel all of the woman's hopes resting on her. El was the only one who could save her son and she knew that.

"Yes."

"Do you think if we got you back there that you could close it?" Mrs. Byers asked, but El didn't look up and she didn't respond. It wasn't a matter of if she could close it, she had to close it and she would, but at what cost?

Mike cried for a long time; he wasn't ashamed to admit it... to himself anyway. As angry as he was with Hopper, ultimately, he could completely understand where he was coming from; after all, Mike would have done anything to protect El. But by no means had he forgiven the police chief. He had spent 357 days thinking El was gone, with no idea that she was still in the same town. It wasn't

something he was going to get over in one evening, no matter how relieved he was just to have El back.

Gathering himself after a while, Mike pushed himself away from Hopper, wiping his face roughly. They had other things to worry about right now, and he was wasting his time being angry when he could be spending it with El.

He left the room and he could hear the older man follow behind him. As Mike came down the hall he saw all of the others, including El, gathered around the kitchen table. They were discussing how El would get into the lab to close the gate, as Will had been able to tap away in his Morse code message.

Mike and Hopper joined the group, El looking up at him as he approached her and came to stand beside her. Hopper, as he was prone to do, took charge of the discussion, listing all the things that could go wrong.

"It's not like it was before. It's grown. A lot," Hopper informed them all after hearing their idea. "And that's considering if we can even get in there. The place is crawling with those dogs."

"Demo-dogs," Dustin corrected him, and Hopper gave him a withering look, asking,

"I'm sorry, what?"

So, Dustin explained, "I said Demo-dogs, like Demogorgon and dogs, you put them together and it sounds pretty badass-"

"How is this important right now?" Hopper cut him off in annoyance.

"It's not, sorry," Dustin apologized quickly, looking away from the police chief.

Mike had been so caught up in their little exchange that when El's soft voice sounded next to him, he was a little startled.

"I can do it," she said with determination.

"You're not hearing me," Hopper argued, but she held fast.

"I'm hearing you. I can do it," she repeated firmly, not taking her eyes off the older man. Mike was just as concerned as Hopper was about El's safety, but there was another major issue with this plan.

"Even if El can there's still another problem, if the brain dies the body dies," he began, the others still not seeing what he was getting at.

"I thought that was the whole point," Max asked, confused.

"It is but if we're really right about this, if El closes the gate and kills the Mind Flayer's army-," he continued to explain, but the look of understanding slowly dawned on their faces and Lucas finished,

"Will's apart of that army."

"Closing the gate will kill him," Mike concluded. Everyone seemed to have felt defeated by this information, but Mrs. Byers had a look as if an idea was brewing in her mind. Suddenly, she stood and made her way down the hall, so they all followed her one by one until they reached Will's room where they all squeezed into the small space. Mike made sure to stick close to El, their shoulder brushing giving him some small comfort.

"He likes it cold," Mrs. Byers said to no one in particular. Now, it was Mike's turn to be confused about what she was getting at.

"What?" Hopper asked.

"That's what Will kept saying to me, he likes it cold," Mrs. Byers answered, walking forward and closing the window that was letting in the chilly November air. "We keep giving it what it wants."

"If this is a virus and Will is the host then...," Nancy chipped in and Jonathan reasoned,

"Then we need to make the host uninhabitable."

"So, if he likes it cold...," Nancy began again, but this time Mrs. Byers was the one to finish her thought for her.

"We need to burn it out of him."

"We have to do it somewhere he doesn't know this time," Mike added, and Dustin agreed,

"Yeah, somewhere far away."

Hopper seemed to have an idea about where another good place would be. So, with the plan in place, he instructed Jonathan to get Will and gave him directions to a place on he and El knew about: the place he had been hiding her this whole time.

El was ready. She had to do this, there was no room for failure. She either did it or her friends could die and that wasn't an option.

Everyone had their marching orders, and it was time for her to go. She could feel Mike's reluctance to let her go, but one of her favorite things about Mike was that he never tried to control her. He would never tell her she couldn't go, no matter how much he didn't want her to; Mike always trusted her and her decisions.

Hopper was already outside smoking a cigarette somewhere, waiting for them to say their goodbyes. Taking a calming breath, El stepped out onto the front porch, Mike close behind her.

Her back was still to him as she struggled to find the courage to face him. El knew one look from those warm brown eyes would make her want to stay and never leave him again. But she told herself that this was to save him, she had to do it.

She was lost in her internal battle when she felt Mike's warm hand slip into hers. El looked down at their joined hands, feeling so many things for the boy behind her. She felt happiness and fear and butterflies and something else she couldn't place, like a deep pull in her heart, telling her that with him is where she belonged. The only way to have that was to close the gate for good, so she entwined their fingers and turned to face him.

As she had anticipated, those dark eyes felt like they were staring straight into her soul and she was speechless.

"Just be careful, all right?" Mike said fiercely, "I can't lose you again."

El had grown a lot this past year, but Mike had grown more. Being this close to him in real life, she could fully appreciate how much taller he was now and hear how his voice had changed.

"You won't lose me," El assured him firmly, shaking her head. She hoped that was true, but if it was between her life and his she'd choose his every time.

She glanced up at him and could see the fear in his eyes, the dry tracks on his cheeks where his tears had fallen earlier. Her heart ached for him and all she wanted was for all of this to be over, so they could be together and he could be happy again.

"Do you promise?" Mike asked her, and she could tell he was trying to hold back his tears again. She didn't want to lie to him, but she didn't want him to worry about her either or do something risky to try and save her if things went badly at the lab. So, she met his eyes unblinkingly and assured him,

"Promise."

It was as if there was a magnet pulling her towards Mike. She so desperately wanted to feel those lips on hers again, especially now that she knew the significance of the gesture. Tilting her head to the side, El's eyes slid closed in anticipation.

"El," Hopper's voice made her head snap to him. She hadn't realized he was there. How long had he been watching them? "C'mon, let's go. It's time."

Turning back to Mike, El took a deep breath, as did Mike. They both knew how dangerous was and all of the risk, but they also knew this was the only way to stop the Mind Flayer. So, Mike nodded his head reluctantly, breathing an affirmation she couldn't make out. He gave her hand one final reassuring squeeze before releasing her. Before she lost her nerve, El spun away from the boy and ran towards Hopper's trucks, getting inside and slamming the door shut as Hopper did the same.

She shouldn't have done it, but she did; El turned in her seat and looked back at Mike. He hadn't moved from his spot on the porch,

just watching the truck pull away and finally her own tears fell. She had been able to hold them back to convince Mike that she would be fine. But she wasn't sure. This could be the last time she ever laid eyes on the boy who made her feel everything with one look.

He couldn't take his eyes off of her. Even long after the truck had disappeared into the darkness, Mike stared at the spot he had last saw her. Mike's brain barely registered that the others had come to stand on the porch behind him, watching them go as well.

How cruel could fate be to them if as soon as they were reunited, they were torn apart again? Nothing about this was fair.

It felt as though his heart was being wrenched from his chest and in a way it was because his heart would always be with El.

As Hopper drove, El just stared out the window into the night. She was trying to make peace with the fact that what she was doing was going to keep Mike safe and finally fix a mistake she had made that put them all in danger.

"So, what? We're just not gonna talk about it then?" Hopper's voice cut through her thoughts, but she had known this conversation was coming. She had just been hoping it could wait until after she closed the gate or she was dead, whichever came first.

Lazily, she rolled her head to look at him, not bothering to lift it from the head rest. She decided to play dumb and asked with annoyance dripping in her tone, "About what?"

Hopper didn't look back at her at first and just said nonchalantly, "Oh, I'm just curious about why you all of a sudden look like some MTV punk."

El looked away at that because she could hear the disdain dripping in his voice. It wasn't like she was proud of what she had almost done with Kali and her friends, but wasn't it his fault to begin with? If he had just told her the truth about Mama and everything she wouldn't have needed to look for the answers to her life and where she

belonged elsewhere. Hell, if he had let her spend any time whatsoever with Mike she wouldn't have needed anything else at all.

"I'm not mad, kid. I just want to know where you've been, that's all" Hopper told her another lie. So, she decided the truth would make him angrier and let him know that she knew he was lying to her. So, she stared straight ahead and informed him flatly,

"To see Mama."

Out of the corner of her eye, El could see his head snap to look at her briefly before focusing again on the road ahead of him. Whatever answer he had expected she could tell it wasn't that one.

"Okay...", he began, and she could practically feel him trying to process what she had just said, eventually managing to ask, "How'd you get there?"

"A truck," she said simply, still not looking at him.

"A truck?" he repeated, his tone going up.

"A big truck," she clarified, looking over to see his reaction now. She knew he had lied and was mad, but he was doing his best not to show it. She had his full attention now as he looked at her with incredulosity.

"A big truck? Whose truck was it?"

"A man's," she replied, turning her face away from him again to stare at the road, which is probably what he should be doing considering he was the one driving.

"A man's," Hopper echoed.

"A nice man," she elaborated. She could hear it in his voice that he thought she was crazy. That she had taken stupid risks and maybe she had, but she could protect herself especially from some truck driver who had no idea who she was.

"Okay, so let me just get this straight in my head, a nice man in a big truck and he drove you to your Mama's then what? Your-aunt

Becky gave you those clothes and that makeup?" Hopper's voice was getting a little higher and she could feel his anxiety over what she had done, but she wasn't really ready to tell him about her trip to see Kali, so she opted for honesty in a different direction.

"I...", she began, thinking of all of the things she had almost done with Kali and her gang. "I shouldn't have left."

El turned to look at the older man, who now couldn't seem to meet her eyes.

"No, this isn't on you kid. I should've been there," Hopper told her, his voice getting softer again. "I never should have lied to you about your mom or about when you can leave. A lot thing I shouldn't have done."

It was easier not to look at him too, so El just stared resolutely ahead as he continued to speak.

"Sometimes I feel like," Hopper gave a sharp inhale and El could practically feel his hurt next to her as he finished, releasing his breath, "I'm some kind of blackhole or something."

Tears were sliding down her face silently. She felt like she understood the emotions he was trying to convey but didn't understand the word he used, so she turned to him and asked, "Blackhole?"

"Yeah, you know it's this thing in outer space it sucks everything towards it and destroys it. Sarah had a picture book about outer space, she loved it," Hopper replied, his voice going a little hard towards the end. Her heart gave a twinge of pain at his analogy of the blackhole he described. Why did he feel he destroyed everything that got close to him? There was a more pressing question on her lips though,

"Who's Sarah?"

Hopper's eyes turned to hers for a moment as if realizing for the first time he had never mentioned this person to her. So, his tone seemed almost matter-of-fact, "Sarah? Sarah's my girl. She's my little girl."

El could tell this was a painful subject for Hopper, why else would he

never mention his daughter? Now, they had gone down the path and he was opening up to her about where all his pain came from she felt compelled to ask, "Where is she?"

"Well, that's kinda the thing, kid, she-uh-she left us," Hopper replied, his words becoming softer and softer as he spoke.

"Gone," El said softly and her heart ached for the policeman. He had lost someone important to him too.

"Yeah, the blackhole, it got her," Hopper's voice hardened again and El could tell it was because he was trying to hold himself together. "And somehow I've just been scared, you know. I've just been scared it'll take you too. I think that's why I get so mad. I'm so sorry for everything. I can be so... so...."

"Stupid," El supplied, eliciting a small smile from the older man and a quiet chuckle.

"Yeah, stupid, really stupid," he agreed, and she smiled and laughed a little through her tears. It made her heart a little lighter.

She understood now. Just like Mike, his pain and agony over losing someone he cared about made him angry. Same with her too. She was in so much pain over not being able to see Mike that it swallowed her up, making her feel powerless, leaving her filled with rage. But no more.

Reaching across, El laced her fingers with his and held his hand tightly to let him know she wasn't mad anymore either. She admitted softly, "I've been stupid too."

"I guess we broke our rule," Hopper said causing a half-smile to curl her lips and then he added, gesturing towards her outfit with his own smile, "I don't hate it, by the way, this whole look. It's kinda cool."

"Bitchin'" she said, using the word she learned from Dottie.

"Okay, sure," she could hear the slight surprise in his voice at her word choice but agreed, "Bitchin'."

Mike wasn't okay with this.

El was going straight into the hive. Not only the place where she had been basically tortured her whole life, but the place where there was hundred of those demo-dogs, the place Bob had been killed. What if they got her too? She had barely survived taking on one Demogorgon last year, how was she supposed to take on that many? He knew she was strong, stronger than he could even imagine, but that didn't mean she still wasn't just a teenager, who could get hurt and bleed and be killed.

He was only marginally aware of that fact that he was pacing back and forth through the Byers' kitchen, his mind racing with all of the possible ways he could lose El now that he just got her back.

"Mike, would you just stop already?" Lucas halted his sweeping of the broken glass to reprimand him. Mike turned to snap back at him,

"You weren't in there, okay, Lucas, that lab is swarming with hundreds of those dogs."

All he could think about was El walking straight into harm's way again. He had lost her to one last year...

"Demo-dogs!" Dustin called from the other room, Mike's frustration growing as they minimized his concern for El's safety.

"The chief will take care of her!" Lucas tried to ease his mind, but it did nothing. Hopper hadn't been able to keep Bob alive so what could he really do against all of those things?

"Like she needs protection," Max muttered to herself. Mike agreed with her on one level. El could certainly take care of herself, but she was vastly outnumbered, not to mention she was going to be expending the majority of her powers on closing the gate. Even if she was able to take out most of them she could be so drained that she wouldn't be able to close the gate and more would appear.

"Dude, if a coach calls a play in a game, bottom line, you execute it," Steve added, stepping up to end the debate with a stupid sports

analogy.

"Okay, first of all, this isn't some stupid sports game, and second, we're not even in the game, we're on the bench," Mike argued hotly. He wasn't the biggest fan of sports, but he knew enough to realize that they weren't even in the game, like his Dad had referenced the day before Halloween.

And this wasn't a game, this was real life. Bob had been eaten by those things, and for him it had all started out as just trying to figure out Will's "puzzle." El's life wasn't a game to him and he wasn't going to sit by and do nothing when he could help her.

"Ri-So, my point is...right, so we're on the bench, there's nothing we can do," Steve stammered, apparently out of analogies, Mike's point having stumped him apparently.

"That's not entirely true," Dustin contradicted him, eliciting a quizzical look from all of them, so he expanded, "I mean, these Demo-dogs have a hive mind, when they ran away from the bus they were called away."

"So, if we get their attention," Lucas posited, and Max shot her eyes to him in excitement,

"Maybe we can draw them away from the lab," she concluded.

"And clear a path to the gate," Mike said to himself, hope filling his chest at the idea he could possibly do something to help El stay safe while trying to save them all.

"Yeah, and then we all die!" Steve shouted, obviously not liking where this conversation was going.

"That's one point of view," Dustin debated, and Steve looked back at him,

"Nah, man that's not a point of view it's a fact."

Mike had stopped paying attention to any of them. His mind was trying to put a plan in motion. How could they draw the demo-dogs away? They'd have to go somewhere they knew they could come to

and then it was like a light went off in Mike's brain.

"I got it!" he shouted, rushing to the spot of Will's map where Mrs. Byers had drawn the red 'X.' "This is where the chief dug his hole, this is our way into the tunnels, and here," Mike stepped to where Will had sent the demo-dogs to kill those soldiers, "right here, this is like a hub. See how all the tunnels feed into here? Maybe if we set this on fire-"

"Ah yeah, that's a no," Steve interrupted trying to shut this down quickly, but it was too late. Mike knew what he had to do now, and he'd do it with or without anyone's help.

But Dustin ignored Steve and said excitedly, "The Mind Flayer would call away his army."

"They'd all come to stop us," Lucas was right there with them.

"Hey, guys," Steve's attempt to get their attention went unnoticed by the party.

"Then we circle back to the exit, by the time they realize we're gone...", Mike continued on as if hadn't heard the older teenager.

"Hey," Steve repeated a little more insistently.

"El would be at the gate," Max finished their plan and Mike was glad she was on the same page. Maybe she wasn't as bad as he thought if she was willing to help a girl she had just met.

"Hey, hey, hey!" Steve clapped loudly in their direction and was finally able to get their attention, but only because their plan was fully formed at this point. "This is not happening."

"But-," Mike tried to contend, but Steve wasn't hearing it.

"No, no, no, no buts, I promised to keep you shitheads safe and that's exactly what I plan on doing. We're staying here on the bench and we're waiting for the starting team to do their job, does everybody understand that?"

"This isn't a stupid sports game!" Mike roared back at him from his

place on the floor. Steve still didn't get that Mike was going to do anything to help keep El out of harm's way.

"I said, does everybody understand that?" Steve growled back, "I need a yes."

None of them said anything, they didn't get the chance. The distinct sound of an engine revving could be heard around the front of the house. Max and Lucas ran towards the front window and Mike heard her tell him anxiously, "It's my brother. He can't know I'm here, he'll kill me. He'll kill us."

Steve went outside to meet Billy and told them all to stay put and out of sight. So, needless to say they all crowded on the couch and peeked over the edge to watch the exchange nervously. Mike felt like this wasn't going to end well and his suspicions were confirmed when Billy looked right at them all, pointing the glowing end of cigarette towards the window. In unison, they all dropped down below the window.

"Shit! Did he see us?" Dustin swore but they all knew the answer.

Loud footsteps could be heard thudding against the wood of the porch and they all stood to see who would be coming through the door. To all of their dread, when the door flung open it wasn't Steve, but very large, and very angry form of Billy.

"Well, well, well, Lucas Sinclair what a surprise," Billy growled dangerously, slamming the door shut behind him. Steve was nowhere to be found. "I thought I told you to stay away from him, Max."

"Billy, go away," Max said in a quiet voice. Mike could see she was scared of her older brother and he was watching the scene with apprehension himself.

"You disobeyed me, and you know what happens when you disobey me," Billy continued, stepping forward aggressively.

"Billy," Max said shakily.

"I break things," Billy bellowed as he suddenly turned towards Lucas and grabbed him, shoving him backwards until he thrust the smaller

boy into a wooden shelf.

"STOP!" Mike, Dustin, and Max shouted at Billy but not daring to approach the bigger teenager.

"Since Maxine won't listen to me maybe you will. You stay away from her. Stay away from her! You hear me?" Mike heard Billy hiss in Lucas' face.

"I said get off me!" Lucas yelled at Billy, kneeling him in the crotch. Billy let go of Lucas with a grunt and stumbled backwards in pain. But, it didn't take long for Billy to recover and when he did he was angrier than ever.

"You are so dead, Sinclair! You are dead," Billy roared, but none of them had noticed Steve enter the house until he yanked Billy back by his shoulder before he could go at Lucas again.

"No, you are," Steve snarled, pulling his fist back and then throwing it forward to punch Billy right in the face.

"Steve!" Max yelled more in surprise than anything.

Now that Billy's attention was solely on Steve, Lucas rushed back over to them. Dustin and Max pulled him into a relieved hug, but Mike kept his eyes on the two older boys. All of this was delaying their plan to help El.

"Looks like you got some fire in you after all! I've been waiting to meet this King Steve everybody's been telling me so much about," Billy said sarcastically with a humorless laugh, blood dripping from his nose.

"Get out," Steve ordered him, giving him a light shove in the chest.

Billy suddenly took a swing at Steve, who must have seen it coming because he ducked quickly, narrowly avoiding the blow only to counter with a punch of his own.

"Get him! Kick his ass!" they shouted, cheering Steve on, but Billy just straightened himself up with a wide smile on his face. Steve punched him hard two more times, sending Billy into flying into the kitchen

sink. It really looked like Steve was going to win this fight. Until Billy grabbed a plate and brought it down hard over Steve's head, shattering it, and then following it with a punch of his own.

Billy grabbed Steve roughly and hissed in his face, "No one tells me what to do."

Then he headbutted Steve and threw him across the room, stalking towards his fallen form. Straddling Steve, Billy began to just lay into him, pummeling him over and over with wild abandon. All of them screamed at Billy to stop but he couldn't hear them or cared.

So, busy were Dustin, Lucas, and Mike with their yelling that they didn't notice Max had grabbed a spare syringe full of sedative and strode purposefully towards Billy. She stabbed him in the neck with the needle and depressed the plunger, injecting him with the tranquillizer, and startling them all into silence at her bold move.

Max moved back from her brother as he stood, turning to face her. From where Mike was standing it looked like it was already starting to take effect, a little more slowly than it had on the much smaller Will. Billy pulled the needle from his neck, his eyes looking at Max in disbelief under drooping eyelids.

"What the hell is this? You little shit, what did you do?" Billy slurred, glancing down at the syringe in his hands before he promptly collapsed onto the floor.

Mike swore but continued to watch Billy laugh on the floor. Max wasn't done with him yet though. She snatched up the bat with the nails on it and held it up menacingly over Billy, threatening, "From here on out, you leave me and my friends alone. Do you understand?"

"Screw you," Billy replied lazily and in response Max brought the bat down extremely close to his crotch. All of the boys in the room gave an internal flinch as Billy looked up in shock at the bat between his legs. When Billy didn't say anything further, Max yanked the bat out of the floor where it had stuck in the wood a little and held it up again.

"Say you understand, SAY IT! SAY IT!" she yelled at him.

"I understand," Billy said quietly.

"What?" Max challenged again.

"I understand," Billy repeated, his voice becoming even more slurred. Then his eyes fell closed and he was unconscious. Mike and the other two boys just stood there trying to process what they had just witnessed.

Max didn't hesitate though. She dropped the bat and went over to her brother, pulling his keys from his front pocket. She held them up and said nonchalantly, "Let's get out of here."

Mike looked from Dustin to Lucas and back. He made a mental note not to ever get on Max's bad side.

It wasn't a very long drive to the lab, but to El it felt like both too short and also like an eternity. Hopper slowed the truck to a stop in front of the lab and threw it into park, getting out. El took a calming breath and exited the vehicle as well. She stared up at the building she had spent the majority of her life in, hearing the screeching and growling of the monsters inside.

It really wasn't much different. Instead of human monsters as it had when she lived there, now it had monsters from the Upside Down.

Terror gripped her, constricting her chest and making it difficult for her lungs to expand, but it wasn't because of the monsters inside now. No, she was afraid of the monsters inside her mind, memories of Papa and the bad men who had tortured her for all of those years.

Heart pounding, images flashed across her eyes unbidden. The cat she had been forced to her hurt, being dragged to the dark room, the bath, opening the gate. Everything about this place made her want to run back to the safety of Mike's arms.

The loud slam of Hopper closing the trunk, startled her out of her flashbacks and her head snapped to see him carrying a very large gun. She really didn't like guns, but given the circumstances she felt it was necessary.

"You let me do the heavy lifting up front. You save your strength for below," Hopper spoke as she continued to stare apprehensively up at the imposing building. She could feel him look down at her as he asked, "You okay?"

Was she okay? Honestly... no, she wasn't okay. Not yet. But as soon as she closed this gate and ended this thing she would be... with Mike. So, she ignored his question and strode determinedly towards that hellish place.

They didn't waste anymore time. Gathering all of the necessary supplies and loading Steve into Billy's car, they all piled in with Max at the wheel. Considering Max was the only one of them that had ever been behind the wheel of a car at all, she was an easy choice for driver. Her driving certainly wasn't smooth but Mike was just anxious to get to the portal and set their plan in motion.

"Nancy?" Steve's voice drew his attention over to the bruised and battered boy. He must really be out of it if he thought he looked like his sister, they looked nothing alike in Mike's opinion.

Steve was really starting to come to, groaning in pain as he lifted his hand to feel his face, but Dustin chastised him lightly, "No, don't touch it." Then Dustin tried to reassure him, "Hey, buddy, shhh you put up a good fight. He kicked your ass, but you put up a good fight. You're okay."

"Okay, you're gonna go straight for half a mile then you're gonna make a left on Mt. Sinai," Lucas told Max from his spot in the passenger seat. Lucas had always been good with maps, so it had been easy to delegate him as navigator, plus he had wanted to sit next to the red head.

"What's going on?" Steve mumbled, then his eyes went wide as he saw who was driving, "Oh my god!"

"Steve, relax she's driven before," Dustin tried to comfort him to which Mike challenged,

"Yeah, in a parking lot."

"That counts!" Lucas defended from the front.

"They were gonna leave you behind," Dustin spoke quickly, trying and failing to calm the older boy down.

"Whoa! Stop the car, slow down!" Steve panicked as Max pressed her foot down harder on the gas pedal, shooting them forward.

"I told you he'd freak out!" Mike shouted at Dustin.

"Everybody shut up! I'm trying to focus!" Max yelled, leaning forward to stare into the darkness.

"Oh, wait! That's Mt. Sinai! Make a left!" Lucas screamed pointing at the road ahead.

"What?"

"Turn left!"

They all screamed in surprise as she hauled the steering wheel to the left, whipping the car around the corner and sending them all sideways at the centrifugal force.

Max drove them all the way to the portal, screeching to a halt mere feet from it. Everyone screamed until they realized they were stopped and alive.

"Hello!" Steve braced himself against the ceiling and Dustin shouted a,

"Whoa!"

"Incredible!" Mike breathed, super impressed with her driving skills. Maybe he'd been wrong about her. Maybe there was room in their party for her.

"I told you. Zoomer," Max said, matter-of-factly, throwing the car into park.

They all spilled out and immediately suited up with the gear they had brought for the mission: goggles for their eyes and bandanas for their

noses and mouths.

"Hey guys, oh, no. Hey where do you think you're going?" Steve groaned but Mike ignored him, taking the gasoline to the front of the car, tying a rope himself and the grill. "What are you deaf? Hello! We are not going down there. I made myself clear. There's no chance we're going into that hole, all right? This ends right now!"

"Steve! You're upset. I get it. But the bottom line is that a party member requires assistance and it is our duty to provide that assistance. Now, I know you promised Nance that you would keep us safe, so keep us safe," Dustin told the older boy as the rest of them began making their way down the hole.

Dustin must have been able to convince him to help because Mike heard him swear from behind him, "Holy shit."

"Uh, yeah I'm pretty sure it's this way," Mike called out to them, looking down at the hand drawn map he had made from Will's colored pages.

"You're pretty sure? Or you're sure?" Dustin challenged, and Mike turned to yell at him impatiently,

"I'm a hundred percent sure, just follow me and you'll know."

El's life was at stake. Did Dustin really think he would allow himself to make a mistake?

Mike turned to lead the way down the tunnels when Steve's voice made him stop.

"Whoa, whoa, whoa. Hey, hey, hey. I don't think so any of you little shits die down here, and I get the blame. Got it, Dipshit?" Steve told him, snatching the flashlight from his hand in the process. "From here on out I'm leading the way."

"C'mon let's go! A little hustle," Steve called out to the rest of them and they began to make their way through the labyrinth.

El walked quickly, but cautiously beside Hopper as the older man led

the way with the flashlight and the big gun. They made their way down the deserted halls every once in a while coming across the dead and partially eaten bodies of men in lab coats.

She made sure not to look at any of their faces. She didn't want to know if she recognized their faces. She didn't want to know how it would make her feel to see bad men who had abused her her whole life dead and mutilated.

Hopper led her to the staircase where copious amounts of blood was smeared on every visible surface. A low groan caught their attention immediately and the policeman ordered her to, "Stay here."

She watched breathlessly as Hopper made his way down the metal steps, pointing the gun until he saw whatever was down there.

"Oh, shit," Hopper swore and then El lost sight of him, but she could still hear him say, "Hey, Doc."

Her heart froze in her chest. The only doctor El had ever known was Dr. Brenner...Papa... was he really alive? Was it him down there? She told herself that Hopper wouldn't have greeted Papa that way.

Sensing there was no immediate danger, El silently made her way down the stairs to see who Hopper was talking to and saw him kneeling in front of unfamiliar man in a lab coat covered in his own blood.

"Those suckers got you pretty good. It's okay don't talk. I'll talk. I got you. I got you. I got you," Hopper comforted him, taking his belt off to tie around the man's massacred leg. El stepped down and into the man's view and Hopper must have noticed the doctor's shocked expression as he looked at her because he introduced, "Oh yeah, I've been meaning to tell you this is Eleven. Eleven, Doc Owens, Doc Owens, Eleven. She's been staying with me for about a year and she's about to save our asses. Maybe when this is all said and done, maybe you could help her out, you know. Maybe you could help her lead like a normal life. One where's she's not poked and prodded, treated like some kind of lab rat, you know. I don't know, it's just a thought."

Hopper tightened the belt and the doctor groaned in pain but said

nothing. El couldn't look away from this man. So many thoughts and feelings were coursing through her. Hopper was truly trying to give her a better life, one where she didn't have to hide anymore and this man had the power to do that.

"Think about it," Hopper told him, handing him a small gun. Don't go anywhere."

The doctor chuckled humorlessly as if he could have moved if he wanted to. El only pulled her eyes away from him when Hopper had stepped away and then she followed, ready to finally end all of this.

Steve led them down the dank passageway, the uneven ground preventing them from moving very quickly.

"God," Lucas swore, glancing around at the mysterious debris flying around them. None have them had ever been in the Upside Down, so it was more than a little disorienting.

"What is this place?" Max asked, her voice muffled from the bandana over her mouth.

"Guys, come on, keep moving," Steve urged them on and Mike was right there with him. He was anxious to hurry up and get this done so El would have a clear path to the gate.

They started moving forward again but didn't make it far when Dustin's screams could be heard back where they had all just been.

"SHIT! Shit! Shit!" he swore and they all turned back to make sure he was okay. "Help! Help! Help!"

Mike's mind jumped to worst case scenario: that one of those demodogs had gotten to Dustin and were tearing him apart. But he didn't hear any of the tell-tale screeching that normally heralded their appearance.

"Dustin!" Mike yelled seeing his friend running towards them and falling to his hands and knees.

"What happened?!" Steve demanded.

"It's in my mouth! Some of it got in my mouth! Shit!" Dustin gave a high-pitched scream, followed by a hacking cough. They all just stared down at him as he spit whatever got into his mouth onto the ground. Eventually, he looked up at them, Steve's flashlight pointed at his face and said, "I'm okay."

"You serious? Very funny, man," Steve huffed and they all sighed in frustration at their friend, walking away to get down to business.

"Jesus, what an idiot," Max muttered beside Mike.

"Hang on. Wait, wait," Dustin called after them, scrambling to his feet.

They continued walking for only a short while more until Steve came to a stop and said, "All right, Wheeler. I think we found your hub."

Mike stepped up to glance around Steve and saw what he was looking at; it was a wide clearing with multiple passageways leading off. Steve was right, this was it. Mike was ready, so he told the party,

"Let's drench it."

They sprang into motion, each of them dowsing every available surface of the chamber in gasoline.

Hopper and El continued their journey through the seemingly endless hallways of the lab until they heard the familiar low growls of the monsters.

"Stay here," Hopper ordered, pointing the flashlight and the gun down the hall, lighting up the falling debris that became thicker as they got closer to the gate.

El watched him go and terror gripped her chest. What if he got hurt because of her?

"Shit," she heard him say from around the corner and she knew... there were too many of them.

Once they had used up all of the gasoline they had, the party and Steve assembled back near the passageway. Steve asked them,

"All right, you guys ready?"

"Ready," they all asserted.

"Light her up," Dustin told him.

"I'm in such deep shit," Steve groaned, flicking his lighter on.

"1-2-3," El heard Hopper count, crushing her eyes closed in anticipation of gunshots and the loud screeching of the demo-dogs, fully prepared to use her powers to save the older man if she needed to.

Steve swung his arm forward and let lose the lighter. Even before it hit the ground, the chamber lit up with an explosion of fire.

El could hear the shrieking of the demo-dogs, almost as if they were in pain, but there were no gunshots... what was hurting them?

"Let's go, let's go," Steve urged, and they didn't need to be told twice. As the shrieking of the virus rung in their ears, they sprinted back through the passageway back to the portal they came down, Dustin repeating behind them,

"Ohmygod, ohmygod."

The shrieks and growls growing more distant, El opened her eyes. El knew. She just knew. Mike and her friends had somehow called the monsters away and saved them. Sensing the danger had passed, she walked down the hall and around the corner to stand next to a dumbstruck Hopper.

They didn't have long to dwell on it because Hopper's radio crackled to life.

"Chief, are you there? Do you copy?" Jonathan's muffled voice came through.

"Yeah, I copy," Hopper replied, holding the radio close to his lips and Jonathan's response was immediate,

"Close it."

Without speaking, she and Hopper got on the elevator and Hopper lowered down. El couldn't take her eyes off of the bright hellish red opening of the gate. It was so much larger than when she had accidentally opened it. It had festered, just like her hurt and anger, until it was almost unrecognizable.

As the elevator came to a stop, El took a calming breath. She could do this, but she needed Hopper to know that she appreciated his support, so she reached out and clasped his hand in hers.

This was it.

"Ohmygod, ohmygod," Dustin continued as they ran.

"This way!" Steve directed after glancing down at Mike's map briefly.

Mike was bringing up the rear when all of a sudden something tripped him up. He fell hard to the ground and made to get up when he saw the vines wrapping around his ankle, preventing him from moving. He tried kicking himself free but it was no use.

"Help!" Mike yelled over and over to his friends, panic setting in, his heart pounding in his chest.

Hopper looked down at her somberly and El glanced up to meet his eyes. She could do this. She had to do this. For Mike. For Hopper. For all of her friends. And for herself.

The gate seemed to growl at her as she prepared herself. She released Hopper's hand and took a calming breath.

Raising her hand, El focused her mind solely on closing the wide

chasm in front of her, but the monster must have sensed her effort. Blood trickled from her nose, but she hardly noticed as a great shadow appeared on the other side of the gate.

"HELP! HELP!" Mike continued to shout and thankfully his friends heard his yells and came back for him. Dustin and Lucas grabbed his arms and tried to tug him up as Steve shouted,

"Hold on!"

"Steve, pull him out!" Dustin urged, but instead Steve took out the baseball bat and struck the tentacle-like vines over and over until it released Mike's ankle.

He quickly scrambled away and was pulled into a standing position, his friends making sure he was okay. Now that their mission was complete, Mike was ready to get out of there and avoid any other close calls despite the throbbing in his ankle.

"Guys, we gotta go!"

But as they turned they were met with the sight of one of the demo-dogs.

"Dart!" Dustin called to the beast as it grumbled at him. They all began to speak at once, trying to get Dustin to back away but he wasn't hearing it, telling them, "Trust me, please."

He continued to approach the monster, speaking softly to it as he lifted his goggles, "It's me, it's me it's your friend, Dustin. It's Dustin. Will you let us pass?" The monster roared in response, but Dustin was unfazed. "I'm sorry about the storm cellar, that was a pretty douchey thing to do. You hungry? I got nougat. Eat up."

Dustin continued to feed the monster, keeping his eyes on it as he gestured for them to walk around, which they did. He left the Three Musketeers and turned back to bid his friend one last farewell,

"Goodbye, buddy."

El wasn't going to give up. The monster would not win.

She closed her eyes and remembered Kali's words to her, *'I want you to find something from your life, something that angers you... now channel it.'*

The feeling of being thrown like a dog in the dark room while she pleaded for Papa to show her mercy floated to the surface.

The gate's edges began to come together.

As they ran, the ground gave a lurch, sending them all stumbling. Then a chilling sound could be heard down the direction they had just come from.

"What was that?" Max asked, panting.

"They're coming!" Mike breathed, before yelling, "Run! Run!"

As they took off down the passage there were various shouts as they scrambled to get out of there before the demo-dogs caught up to them.

They made it to the portal, and Steve gave Max a boost up the rope first. Lucas was next and then Mike himself. All that was left was Dustin and Steve.

"Dustin! Come on!" Mike yelled down at him, holding his hand out as the demo-dogs closed in on them. Mike's eyes went wide, and he was certain all of the air had been sucked from his lungs as he watched the demo-dogs come at the two.

But then they ran past... dozens of them sprinted past, jostling Steve and Dustin in their rush to get around them. There was only one person who could be responsible, and it meant she was succeeding,

"Eleven."

Both of her nostrils were dripping blood with the effort of closing the gate, but El persevered.

She barely noticed that Hopper had to fend off a couple of the demo-dogs so focused was she on fighting back the Mind Flayer and closing this gate for good.

It wasn't enough. It was becoming too much. She cringed at the effort, blood coming from her ears now, but she wouldn't stop.

'You have a wound, Eleven, a terrible wound and it's festering. Do you remember what that means? Festering? It means a rot and it will grow. Spread,' imaginary Papa had told her.

'The gate... I opened it....'

'I'm the monster...,'

Mama...

'And eventually it will kill you.'

The monster was winning. It had reached through the gate and was going to kill her and everyone she cared about.

Flinging her other hand out towards it, El gave a guttural scream, using every bit of anger, every bit of power. Her feet began to lift off the ground, but she was completely unaware.

The monster's tentacle reaching out to her began to disintegrate, the edges of the gate sealing up until it closed completely.

She had done it. She had closed the gate. Mike was safe.

Her vision was becoming blurry and all she wanted to do was sleep.

Hopper knelt down to her, pulling her into a tight hug as he congratulated her, his voice thick with emotion, "You did good, kid. You did so good."

And she finally allowed the darkness to take her.

A/N: I really hope you guys like this one! I really enjoyed writing it, especially the beginning part (for obvious reasons).

The action was a little bit more challenging and took me more time to hash out. The next chapter will be the last and will cover the Snow Ball and some of the lead up to it. I really am so happy that you all have liked these novelizations and every review is a little gift in my inbox. Let me know what you think! And As always you all are amazing and I'm open to ideas of how you feel season 3 should go. I have my own theories and I'm interested to see if they line up with y'all's expectations.

10. Epilogue: The Snow Ball

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EPILOGUE: THE SNOWBALL

This was so stupid.

Mike stood at the bottom of the stairs in his sweater and tan blazer, tolerating his mother taking pictures, 'for posterity,' as she called it.

The Polaroid clicked and flashed, the picture printing out the front and falling to the floor and his mom bent down to pick it up quickly. Mike should have used that as his escape, but he wasn't quick enough.

"All right, that's enough," Mike groaned as she brought the camera back up to her face.

"One more, okay, just one more," she insisted.

"Why?" Mike growled in frustration.

"You look so handsome," his mother squealed in delight, bringing the camera up to her face again, squinting to look through the viewfinder.

"Mom!"

"Mike," she whined right back at him, snapping another picture.

There was not much he could do to get out of this situation, she was his ride to the dance. Nancy had said she was going to hanging out with Jonathan up until the dance and then going with the Byers.' So, that left Mike to get dropped off by his mom which was definitely not ideal, but she said he'd ruin his nice clothes if he rode his bike.

Eventually he was able to convince her that they'd be late if they didn't leave and she finally put the camera away. Thankfully, his

mother drove him there in relative silence, aside from her pestering him to make sure Jonathan got pictures of him while he was at the dance, which Mike ignored.

He wasn't super excited about tonight, but his friends had all but forced him to go. They said it was their last dance before high school and he had to go or, as Dustin had told him, 'you'll regret it the rest of your life.' But Mike highly doubted that. All this night was going to do was remind him of his failed promise to El over a year ago to take her.

The stab of pain he felt whenever he thought about her never got any easier to handle. It was slightly less intense than the agony he had felt before when he hadn't known whether she was dead or alive, but not by much. It was just a different kind of pain; it was the kind of raw ache knowing that she was so close, less than a couple miles away, and he wasn't allowed to see her. But Hopper assured him it wasn't forever, and Mike was willing to wait for her for forever if that's what it took to keep her safe. It was just days like today, the day of the Snow Ball, that were particularly tough without her. It made him think of the last time he had seen her.

As the headlights of Billy's car shone, blinding them all, Mike knew. It was over.

Then, slowly the beams dimmed back to their normal brightness. El had done it; he knew she would be able to close the gate. The adrenaline from their mission to draw the demo-dogs away never even had a chance to leave his blood stream as another fear gripped him.

The gate was close, but had she survived it?

"Let's go!" Mike shouted, already yanking the bandana and goggles from around his neck and rushing to back to Billy's car. Flinging open the passenger door, Mike turned to see no one had followed him. They were still all staring dumbfounded beside the portal. Well, they could stand there as long as they wanted but Mike needed to see El, needed to lay his eyes on her again to convince himself she was okay.

"Steve! Guys! Come on!" he screamed, finally getting their attentions.

"Mike, calm down. She closed it!" Lucas called back to him as he and the others made their way to the car, much slower than Mike preferred.

Mike was losing patience. Of course, she had closed the gate, but at what cost? As long as he lived, Mike would never forget the way she looked last year after she had killed all of those bad men with her powers. She had been so drained, her skin deathly pale, blood oozing from her nose and ears, her breathing shallow. The gate and the Mind Flayer were much bigger enemies and probably required a lot more effort. El was easily the strongest person he knew but she wasn't invincible.

But the thing that scared Mike the most was that he couldn't feel her presence anymore. This past year he had been comforted by the feeling of her near him, even if he thought he was going crazy, now he knew he hadn't been.

"Guys, please, I just need to see her. I need to make sure she's okay," Mike begged, his chest heaving as he tried to fill his lungs with much needed air, but it was difficult. Every breath was a struggle and it had nothing to do with just being in the Upside Down. No, Mike felt the crushing fear of possibly losing El again.

Even in the darkness, Mike could see Steve give him a look, as if considering him, but he didn't argue, just opening the driver's side door and leaning on it, ordering them, "You heard the man. Get in, shitheads."

There was no more debate. Mike sat in the front, his ears barely registering the excited conversation of Lucas, Dustin, and Max in the backseat as they rehashed their real-life campaign tonight. Mike's mind was too busy racing through all the possible scenarios of where she could be, but ultimately, they decided that everyone would have met back up at the Byers' house so that's where they headed.

Sitting there, clenching his hands together so tightly his knuckles had turned white, Mike could feel Steve's gaze on him every few minutes.

"I'm sure she's fine," Steve's attempt to comfort him took Mike off guard, but he couldn't manage a response as his throat had gone completely dry.

As they pulled up the Byers' long drive, Jonathan's car could be seen parked out front alongside Bob's, but also...Hopper's truck.

The car hadn't even come to a complete stop when Mike unbuckled the seat belt and began opening the door.

"Hey!" Steve shouted to him, but Mike was already out the door, stumbling a little as his feet hit the ground. But in his rush to get out of the car he almost missed the dark figure coming around the side of the truck. When Mike did notice he was already in a full sprint and he skidded to a halt in surprise. It was Hopper.

The chief seemed to have just noticed him too because he paused in front of the back-passenger door, his face a mask of emotion. Mike's chest was tightening and the only thing that would make him feel better was to see her.

Hopper said nothing, just gave him a slight nod, acknowledging Mike's presence, and then turned to the truck. Mike craned his neck to see around him, but he didn't have to wait long. When Hopper turned around El was laying lifelessly in his arms, her head hanging limply over his arm.

It felt as though his heart had been slashed open and Mike felt like his chest was being crushed; he couldn't breathe, he couldn't think.

"Is she...?" Mike choked but he couldn't say it.

Hopper gave him a hard look and told him gruffly after a slight pause, "She'll be fine after she gets some rest."

If Mike's own emotions weren't making it impossible to see anything else but El, he would have noticed the slight strain to the chief's voice. Kicking the door closed, Hopper began carrying her towards the house and Mike was finally able get his feet to move. He had to basically jog to keep up with Hopper's long strides, but he wasn't going to let El out of his sight.

Then the most welcome sound met his ears: El's voice.

"Mike...?" her normally soft voice was even softer. It made Mike's heart ache and all he wanted to do was take her in his arms and never let her go.

"I'm here, El. I'm right here," Mike assured her urgently, holding the door open for Hopper so he could maneuver her through the doorway. Once inside Hopper went straight for the couch and set her down carefully.

Mike was beside her instantly, lacing his fingers with hers.

Hopper stepped back just a little and Mike could feel him staring down at the two of them, but he said nothing and eventually walked away quietly to give them some space.

Mike's eyes were glued to El finally having the time to really get a good look at her. Her hair was still slicked back but a little more disheveled than when she had first appeared after defeating the demo-dogs. The dark eye makeup she wore was slightly smudged from what looked like sweat and maybe tears. Dried blood covered most of her upper lip as well as her ears in stark contrast to her pallid skin. Then El's eyelids fluttered and so did Mike's heart at the movement.

"Mike...", she croaked before her eyes had even fallen on him. She turned her head, so her eyes could meet his and shifted as though she were going to try to sit up. Her brow was creased with the effort and in response, Mike placed his free hand on her shoulder while the other gave her hand a comforting squeeze.

"Hey, it's okay. You're safe now. Just rest," he tried to comfort her, but he could feel the back of his eyes burning as he tried to hold back tears of relief. She had promised that he wouldn't lose her again and she had kept that promise.

"I closed it," she told him just above a whisper, her eyelids were still droopy as she struggled to stay conscious. Mike smiled down at her, losing the battle against his tears as several slipped silently down his cheeks. He was so very proud of her and he had no idea how to put into words exactly the enormity what he felt for her.

"You saved us, El, you saved all of us," he told her passionately, which elicited a sleepy smile from her. Mike wiped his tears with the back of the hand not holding hers and reminded himself that as much as he wanted to stare into her eyes for the rest of forever, she was completely drained.

"Now you should sleep," he told her gently, and he watched her relax back into the cushions. She still seemed to be fighting sleep as the sliver of her mahogany colored eyes gazed back at him and she slurred sleepily,

"Stay...please?"

Those words made Mike's heart beat erratically in his chest and he was certain he had never felt happier in his entire life.

"I'm not going anywhere, El," he said firmly. He meant it. Hopper would have to physically remove him from her at this point.

"Promise?" her eyes searched his, but this was a promise that would be easy for him to keep.

"I promise," he swore. With that assurance, El lost the battle with sleep and her eyelids slid closed. Mike didn't have a chance to breathe because a moment later he heard someone step up behind him, and he just assumed it was Hopper. He still hadn't forgiven the cop, and maybe he never would, but he was grateful he had gotten El to the gate and back safely.

"Hey, can you-," Mike began to say but cut himself off when he turned his head and his eyes were met with a damp dishtowel over his shoulder. He followed the person's arm up to see that it was Nancy.

"Here, she looks like she's been through hell," she thrust the dishtowel in his direction again, and Mike took it slowly. His sister didn't say anything else to him, just gave him a knowing smile, and walked away to help Jonathan tidy up the house.

Mike watched her walk away with an astonished look before directing his attention back to the girl on the couch. She was completely asleep now, her lips slightly parted as she inhaled and exhaled lightly.

Shifting his body sideways, Mike nervously lifted the damp dishtowel and paused so it hovered over her skin. The last thing he wanted to do was touch her without her permission while she slept, but he also didn't think she'd enjoy having this dried blood caked on her skin all night either.

As if she could hear his inner turmoil, El's eyelids fluttered a little again until they slowly opened, and her eyes found his.

"You stayed," she said, her voice hoarse and a small smile curving her lips. He smiled right back at her and reminded her,

"I promised, remember?"

Her smile widened, and her eyes closed again, so before she fell back asleep he wanted to ask her.

"Hey, El, is it- is it okay if I-if I clean the blood...", Mike stuttered, unsure of how to proceed, as he gestured to his own nose. It wasn't a question most people asked their...whatever El was to him. He really didn't know what he was doing here.

"Yes," was her simple response and he knew she had fallen asleep again as her face relaxed.

Just because El gave him consent didn't make his nerves go away, but he felt a little better knowing she was okay. Bringing the towel up again, Mike gently began to dab at the dried blood on El's upper lip.

The nerves eased as Mike continued tenderly making sure she was all cleaned up. So encompassed with his task that he didn't notice the others behind him laying out sleeping bags and blankets on the living room floor.

Before he had met El he would've been embarrassed to be this close to a girl in front of his friends but now he could care less. All he cared about was El and her well-being. Mike swore to himself that he would spend every second he could with her, taking care of her and trying to make her happy.

Mike was forced back into the present when the car came to a sudden stop. His mom gave him an excited smile, but Mike made a hasty exit. He checked in with Mr. Clarke and went inside the gym and it took him a moment in the crowd but eventually he caught sight of Will, Lucas, and Max, quickly making his way over to them.

The combination of all of the memories of El-being in this very gym where she had used her powers on Troy to protect him and then again to help them find Will- on top of watching Lucas make googly eyes at Max was making it difficult for Mike to see the point in being here.

It was going to be a long, miserable night.

This was so amazing.

El stood as still as humanly possible while Nancy brushed the makeup on her eyelids, but as hard as she tried, she couldn't stop the wide grin that kept spreading across her face. This is the moment she had been waiting for ever since Mike had asked her last year: the Snow Ball.

The memory of the last time she saw him floated to the surface of her mind as Nancy then began carefully brushing her hair.

Warmth. That was the first thing El became aware of as darkness seeped away into light. She was still so very tired, and she felt as though she had been run over by a big truck. The idea of opening her eyes seemed like an impossible task, one she wasn't ready to undertake quite yet. Instead she allowed her mind to focus on the senses that allowed her to keep her eyelids closed for just a little longer.

There was something soft and warm pressed into her side and El fixated on figuring out what it was exactly. Her hand had the same warmth but there was also the distinct feeling of fingers wrapped around hers. Curiosity got the better of her and with effort she forced her eyelids open.

Light filtered in through a window above her, forcing her eyes to blink rapidly until they adjusted, her free hand rubbing the sleep from them. Once the fuzziness had cleared from her vision, El was able to look at her surroundings. Glancing down, El's heart raced at what she saw, or rather who.

Mike's hand was clasped in hers, his head rested on the edge of the couch, pressed into her side. The sight of the boy so close to her was effective at fully waking her up, so she lifted herself up on her elbows to get a better look at him.

He was still sound asleep from what she could tell, his dark hair swept across his forehead, his face completely relaxed. That made her happy. This past year she had seen him in her mind visits and he always looked so sad, his brow almost always creased. So, to see Mike so tranquil was a welcome sight.

Thinking back to last night, El remembered Mike's heartfelt words and then another memory occurred to her. Slowly with her free hand, El touched the tips of her fingers to just below her nostrils, feeling nothing.

So, it hadn't been a dream. El's lips curled into a smile but it was short lived.

For the first time, she noticed several things. One, she was at the Byers' house and two, they weren't alone. Hopper stood off to the side, hands on his hips as he watched the two of them. She shifted slightly so she could look up at him better, a deep frown on his face.

"Hey, kid," he greeted, stepping closer to them, his eyes shifting to Mike briefly before continuing, sounding regretful, "I gotta get you back to the cabin. They'll come looking for you here."

El's heart sunk into her stomach. He didn't have to ask who he was referring to, she knew he was talking about the bad men, but she wasn't ready to go back to the cabin, not now that she had Mike again. But she also couldn't deny that he was right. The bad men had to know that she had closed the gate and would be trying to find her.

Mike began to stir a little, nuzzling his face into their joined hands before he really woke up. El watched as the dark-haired boy lifted his head and seemed to stare uncomprehendingly at her. His eyes went from bleary to wide as he seemed to realize where he was or remembered the events of last night.

El kept her gaze on his pretty face; she couldn't believe he had stayed by her side all night, sleeping in what must have been an extremely uncomfortable position leant against the edge of the couch. But he didn't seem bothered at all, far from it. After the shock had worn off, Mike then gave her a wide smile and the butterflies fluttered around in her stomach once more, a feeling that she had desperately missed while they were apart.

Using her free hand, El pushed herself up into a sitting position, but Mike kept his eyes on her, glancing up at her from his spot on the floor.

His smile was short-lived too though.

Mike must have felt Hopper's presence as well because he turned to look over his shoulder, a scowl appearing on his perfect features.

"We have to go," Hopper told him firmly, leaving no room for debate. Even

El knew after their conversation last night that Hopper was just trying to keep her safe the best way he knew how, but that didn't make it any easier for her or for Mike apparently to hear.

Mike didn't argue, he didn't say anything at all, instead he just turned his face back to El, and lifted himself to sit next to her on the couch. Taking both of her hands in both of his, Mike's anger with Hopper seemed to have evaporated. He didn't meet her eyes but she could see his expression on his downturned face. He looked so unbelievably crushed, but also his eyes were full of acceptance, as if he knew this was how it had to be.

"Not until she's had breakfast first," a familiar voice piped up from behind them, and El tore her eyes from Mike just long enough to see Mrs. Byers stepping up beside Hopper. Jonathan was there too, two steaming plates of food in either hand, which he offered to both of them. Mike let go of her hands reluctantly so they could both accept the food.

Mrs. Byers began a hushed conversation with Hopper, so she and Mike ate wordlessly. She was starving, and he had to be too, but she could see out of the corner of her eye that he just pushed the scrambled eggs around his plate morosely.

"It was you, wasn't it?" she began, breaking the silence that had descended between them. Mike lifted his depressed dark eyes to hers questioningly, so she elaborated, "You drew the monsters away."

El hadn't really given it a lot of thought before she said it, but it was a statement that applied to more than just the demo-dogs. Mike had taken her out of the rain and slowly chased away all of her monsters.

Mike seemed to realize what she was saying and lowered his eyes again as he replied glumly, "Oh yeah, the whole party did."

El set her plate down and turned her body more fully towards Mike. He must have sensed her movement because he glanced up and mimicked her action. She took his hands once more, wanting to memorize every detail of this moment to save during those long lonely days in the cabin to come.

His hands were soft in hers, his thumb tenderly stroking her knuckles, making her heart feel as if it were going to burst from her chest. They were so close on the couch, their shoulders and thighs touching, the contact

warming her entire body and holding off the icy chill that threatened to overtake her. She wanted to say so many things to him, but words just completely left her. So, instead she leaned her head against his shoulder, burrowing her face in his neck, trying to block out reality.

That had been a month ago. A month without seeing Mike's soft brown eyes, a month since she had held his hand, a month since he had held her close to his chest.

It had been completely and utter agony. At first.

Ever since that night she closed the gate, she and Hopper had promised to try to be honest and communicate better. So, when she had a mind visit with Mike one night and she came to the dinner table with tears on her cheeks afterwards, she told him the truth. Mike had told her that the Snow Ball was next week and El had to explain to Hopper why it meant so much to her.

And he did something surprising. The day after that he came home with an envelope for her which contained a birth certificate stating she, Jane Hopper, was the daughter of Terry Ives and James Hopper. He had to explain exactly what that meant to her, but then tears had spilled down her face because she knew that not only had she found home, but also a family. So had Hopper.

That night he also gave her his daughter, Sarah's, bracelet off his own wrist, telling her that he would never forget her but he would stop being a black hole, and if she wanted he could be her Dad. El had been so happy, but he wasn't done there. He said that, if she still wanted to go, El could go to the Snow Ball with Mike.

El was certain she had never been happier in her entire life. She wasn't used to that much happy and it felt as though her heart would burst. That's what being all the way happy instead of half-way happy must feel like. It was a feeling she hoped would never go away.

"All done!" Nancy told her cheerfully, setting down the brush. "Take a look at yourself."

El was sitting nervously on the lid of the toilet in the cabin's cramped bathroom. Slowly, she stood apprehensive about seeing what she

looked like, so her eyes avoided the mirror until finally she couldn't any longer.

She almost didn't recognize her own face in the mirror, so different was she from the girl with the shaved head from the lab.

"I'm so jealous. I wish I had naturally curly hair like yours," Nancy added and El could see her in the reflection. Her heart swelled at Nancy's words and a pleased smile crept onto her face at the compliment.

Nancy had already helped her by helping Hopper pick out a dress for her to wear and doing her makeup, but for some reason her hair had been the one thing she was most anxious about.

From the first time she had seen Nancy's picture, El had been envious of her long hair. In the last year El's hair had grown quite a bit, but not nearly to the length of Nancy's. So, to hear that Nancy was jealous of *her* hair made her happy.

She was ready.

This was absolute torture.

Max, Lucas, Will, and Mike found a table to claim before they were all taken and sat. While the others had animated conversations, Mike moped at the table, unable to think about anything else but how El wasn't here with him. Then he spotted Dustin coming to them, at least he thought it was Dustin.

"Holy shit! What happened to you?" Mike swore, staring wide-eyed at his friend, who had completely changed his hair. Dustin had somehow styled it into a strange pompadour mullet thing and Mike had a hard time believing that was the look he was actually going for.

"What do you mean, 'what happened?'" Dustin asked, apparently ignorant to what they were referring to.

"What?" Mike hissed in disbelief.

"Dude," Lucas began but Max beat him to it,

"Your hair..."

"It's terrible," Lucas continued, reaching out to touch the pile of curls on top of his head. "Is there a bird nesting in there?"

"What do you mean, 'what's wrong?' There's nothing wrong with my hair! There's no bird nesting in here, assholes," Dustin told them defensively as he patted his hair down. "I worked hard."

The dreaded sound of 'Time After Time' coming on the speakers made them all freeze. This was a slow song and slow songs required slow dancing. As Mike watched their classmates couple up and dance it made him feel even more miserable not have El there if that was possible. Before he had met her he thought these dances were stupid and he'd never want to dance with a girl, but El wasn't just any girl. But if he couldn't dance with her then he didn't want to dance with anyone. Dances really were stupid.

Mike's thoughts were interrupted by the sound of Lucas' dramatic exhale.

"Max, hey," Lucas spun to face her with a cheesy, nervous smile on his face. Max glanced over her shoulder at him her eyes looking at him as if he were ill. "It's-uh- it's nice right?"

Mike watched as Lucas stumbled over himself to ask Max to dance.

"You want to uhm...You want to like...you know? Like just you and me?"

"Are you trying to ask me to dance, stalker?" Max asked incredulously.

"No, of course, not," Lucas backtracked quickly, before adding hopefully, "unless you want to..."

"So smooth," Max sighed, grabbing his hand and pulling him towards the dance floor. "Come on."

Mike watched them walk, hand in hand towards the dance floor. He

couldn't really blame Lucas for everything that had happened with Max, but it definitely made the absence of El more prominent.

None of them noticed the brunette girl approach until she spoke, "Hey, Zombie Boy, do you want to dance?"

Mike recognized her but he couldn't remember her name, but Will needed his help. He was frozen and stuttering, glancing to Mike for assistance.

"Uhm I don't... I mean... yeah, sure," Will stumbled over his words, requiring a light shove from Mike. With that, they both walked out onto the dance floor and awkwardly moved to the music.

Mike merely watched his friends dance when Dustin took a deep breath and turned to him, "Wish me luck, Mike, I'm going in."

Dustin gave him an uncharacteristic wink, which elicited what Mike knew must have been a confused look from himself, before Dustin marched over to Stacey. From this distance Mike couldn't hear their exchange but he knew that it couldn't be good, so he turned to look away.

Now that all of his friends had left him, Mike was allowed to sit and be miserable alone.

Nancy had long gone to get to the dance, leaving her and Hopper alone in the cabin once more. She could tell he was anxious about letting her go to the Snow Ball, but she could also tell he was trying to hide it for her benefit.

They had already gone over multiple times what she should say when she got to the front and that Hopper would be waiting outside for her and everything possible scenario he could think of. Now, there were no more words to be said, so they rode in relative silence to Mike's school, her heart racing a mile a minute as he imagined what their reunion would be like, something she had thought of so many times, both before she had closed the gate and after. Whenever she wasn't with Mike, El was imagining what it would be like when they were back together.

Hopper pulled up in front of the school and cut the engine. He looked as if he wanted to say so many things to her, the fear clear in his eyes, even in the darkness, but with a nervous smile, all he said was,

"Have fun, kid."

Every breath you take...

Mike was only peripherally aware that the song had changed. It didn't matter. None of this mattered without El. He briefly considered just getting up and walking home. Being here was only making him feel worse. But then he felt something. A familiar presence that he had felt for the past year.

Every move you make...

El stepped through the double doors, taking a calming breath, but it did nothing to ease her nerves.

Every bond you break...

Mike thought he saw something out of the corner of his eyes, so he shifted his gaze slightly to his left when all of the air was sucked out of his lungs. It was her.

Every step you take...

She was immediately overwhelmed by all of it: the sheer amount of other kids dancing together, the bright streamers hanging from the ceiling, the loud music, but nothing would stop her from finding Mike.

I'll be watching you...

Mike stared, not believing his eyes. But it was El. She was always easily the most beautiful girl in the room but standing there in the front of the double doors to the gym, she was literally breathtaking. She hadn't seen him yet, even as he shot to his feet of their own accord. He wanted to run to her to pull her in his arms and never let her go. But he was also frozen in place, fearing if he moved it would break this perfect illusion he had created for himself apparently.

Every single day...

She could feel his presence. Mike was definitely nearby, so she followed that feeling, scanning the crowd until her eyes landed on the dark-haired boy, her heart stopped beating.

Every word you say...

As if in slow motion, Mike watched as El's face turned and her eyes found him across the crowded room. A small smile formed on her lips, shiny with lipstick, lip gloss, or whatever, he couldn't take his eyes off of them, off of her. Just like a pair of magnets, they were drawn together once again, until they were mere feet from one another. His heart was pounding so loud that he was certain she had to be able to hear it over the music. Mike fiddled with the hem of his blazer in order to keep himself from just throwing his arms around her and crushing her to his chest.

Every game you play...

Breathing became next to impossible. El wasn't even sure how she had been able to get her feet to move but her body had been drawn forward to Mike. All she wanted to do was fall forward into his arms and hold him for the rest of forever, but she just gazed up at him taking in his appearance. He looked so handsome in a fancy jacket and even a tie, his dark hair swept across his forehead. But it was his warm eyes looking down at her that made her feel like the usual butterflies she felt around him were caught in a tornado in her stomach.

Every night you stay...

"You look beautiful," Mike told her, unashamed, not nearly as nervous as he imagined he would be telling a girl this. But this wasn't just any girl. This was El. She really was beautiful in blue dress with a pink belt that accentuated her waist. Not to mention her gorgeous curly hair that was styled back gracefully. Mike's eyes were fixed on her, unaware of anything else in the room, as she averted her eyes, her skin flushing just slightly. What looked like a pleased smile curved her lips, a small dimple creasing her cheek. It made his heart swell with happiness to see her smile. It was all he ever wanted from

her, was for her to be happy.

I'll be watching you...

El could feel warmth creep up her neck into her cheeks at Mike's words. Beautiful was even better than pretty. Even if she wanted to El couldn't have hidden the shy smile that curled her lips. She wanted to tell him he was beautiful too, but words seemed to have escaped her as she looked back up at him.

Oh, can't you see...

Then Mike remembered they were finally at the Snow Ball together. The one thing he had wanted for over a year. He wouldn't squander this moment. Glancing around, finally noticing the people around them, he asked her, "Do you want to dance?" Mike watched as the smile disappeared from her face as she too noticed they weren't alone. He would do anything to bring that smile back to her face.

You belong to me...

El knew that dancing was of course part of a dance, but still her heart sunk a little. She didn't want Mike to feel embarrassed to be dancing with someone who didn't know how, so slowly, she admitted, "I don't know how."

How my poor heart aches...

"I don't either," Mike assured her honestly with an encouraging smile. Mike didn't care if everyone danced around them and he just stared into her eyes for hours on end, but he wanted her to feel comfortable and that she was in control of the situation. "Do you want to figure it out?"

With every step you take...

Her heart was thudding against her ribcage in anticipation of this moment. She adored all the little ways Mike made her feel safe. He never made her do anything she didn't want to do, but was always there for her when she was uncomfortable or scared.

Every move you make...

The smile had returned to her face and she gave him a slight nod, making his stomach flutter with happiness. Reaching down, he slipped his hand over hers, the electricity sparking between them, and he led her into the crowd of other slow dancing couples. Once he had found a good spot, he turned to face her, not daring to release her hand.

Every vow you break...

Glancing around for a moment at the other couples dancing, El tried to get a sense of how this was supposed to work. But her nerves were completely unnecessary because Mike was there every step of the way.

Every smile you fake...

"I think- like this," Mike told her, gently taking her hands and guiding them onto his shoulders one at a time. "Yeah, like that." He gave her an encouraging smile, reveling in the feeling of being this close to her again. Slowly, he began swaying them back and forth to the music, never taking his eyes off of hers.

Every claim you stake...

It didn't take very long for her to get lost in the rhythm of the song as Mike guided them in lazy circles. She was mostly entranced by the way his soft brown eyes were looking at her, as if she were the only girl in the entire world.

I'll be watching you...

They were the only two people in the room; at least as far as Mike was concerned. He memorized every detail of this moment, but he knew he'd never forget this night. Her light brown eyes stared back at him, reflecting everything he was feeling for her.

Since you've gone I've been lost without a trace...

Her fingers curled around the back of his neck and entwined in the back of his hair a little. She was so close, his hands securely around her waist. That magnet feeling was happening again. El could feel the pull of Mike that she got whenever they were close but not quite

close enough.

I dream at night, I can only see your face...

Mike leaned forward and softly pressed his lips to hers. It was nothing like the first time he kissed her in the cafeteria over a year ago. That had been a quick, nervous peck compared to this. This was full of something else entirely. This was the kiss of two people who had waited more than 353 days to see each other again, who had never given up on each other, who had found each other.

I look around but it's you I can't replace...

Mike gazed down at her, with a happy smile as El tried to take in air, breathless from their kiss. She smiled up at him, and she felt that every single one of those days was worth it. She'd wait an eternity just to see that smile again. In that moment, in Mike's arms, El realized she was feeling something she had never experienced in her short life, but she knew...

I feel so cold and I long for your embrace...

After Mike broke the kiss, El had leaned forward and pressed her forehead to his, and he was utterly content. That moment, dancing with El at the Snow Ball, the moment Mike had waited so long for, the moment he dreamed about all of those nights he had no idea if she was alive or dead, that's when Mike knew...

I keep crying, "Baby, baby, please..."

She loved him.

He loved her.

A/N: And that's the end! I really hope you all enjoyed reading this as much as I enjoyed writing it. Thank you all for your ideas for season 3! I've found that most of them line up with where I was headed anyway so I guess great minds think alike. In an effort to make sure you guys don't have to wait crazy long in between chapters (since writing 100% original material is so much more time consuming) I'll be taking some time to get a

head start on my season 3 story. I'm not sure if I'll just title it Stranger Things 3 or what (since there are a lot of those on here) or something different, but either way I'll post an update to this story when I've posted the first chapter. Again, you all are amazing and I've loved every single review. You guys give me the confidence to keep writing, so thank you!